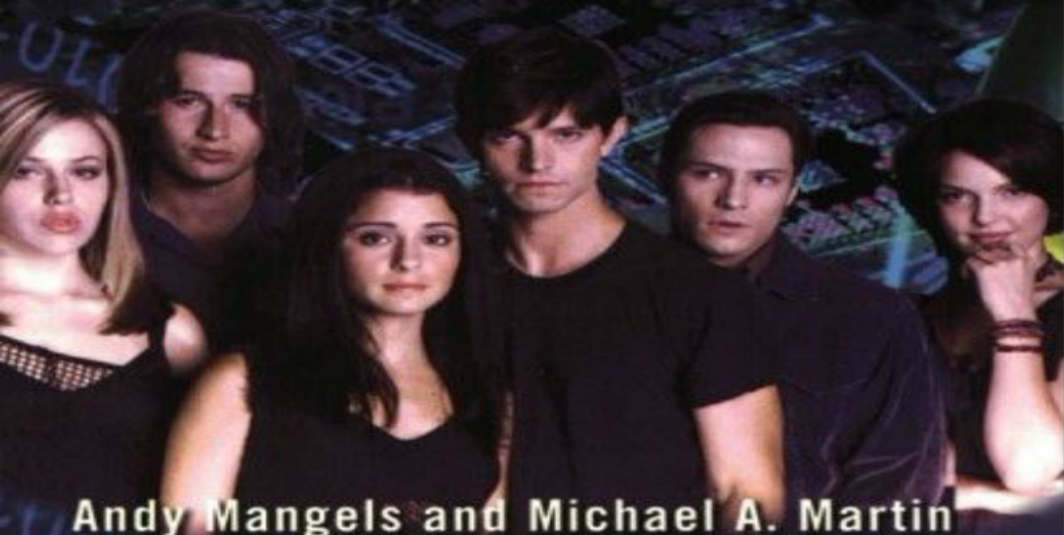


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From the television series developed by Jason Katims

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Annotation

TV Series Placement: Post-Season 3 VISIONS OF DANGER Liz, Max, Maria, Michael, and Kyle didn't expect that when they left Roswell, their lives would suddenly become perfect. They were, after all, on the run from the FBI. But they certainly didn't think things could get much worse. They're learning how wrong they were. The FBI has tracked them via their email accounts and is hot on the group's trail. It can only be a matter of time before they are apprehended. Meanwhile, in New York City, three alien Dupes are captured by the police. When the Feds are brought on to the case, the Special Unit recognizes the Dupes and wonders why "Tess," "Michael," and "Isabel," are so different. Little do they know they are dealing with a case of mistaken identity. And the real Isabel has more pressing concerns, if Liz's latest vision is to be believed.... This is the first of a two-part finale for the Roswell saga, wrapping up all the storylines from the television and book series! Read the exciting conclusion in TURNABOUT. . . coming soon!

- [Andy Mangels, Michael A. Martin](#)



Andy Mangels, Michael A. Martin

Pursuit

(Roswell"-07)

TV Series Placement: Post-Season 3

Visions of danger

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Printed in the United States of America 10 987654321 Library of Congress Control Number 2003100466 ISBN 0-689-85522-2 I dedicate this book to Richard and Christie Finn, who have been both friends and supporters of my professional career for over fifteen years. M.

This book is for my eldest niece, Becky Peabody Estepp. Your sense of humor helps keep me sane. M. A. M.

PROLOGUE

What Has Gone Before...

1999: September 23. Journal entry one. I'm Liz Parker, and five days ago I died. After that, things got really weird...

Liz Parker was a relatively normal teenage girl, working at her parents' alien-themed diner, the Crashdown Cafe. Then came that fateful fall day when a gunman accidentally shot Liz during an argument with another customer. A boy Liz knew from high school, Max Evans, knelt beside her and put his hand over her bullet wound, healing her completely. But when Max ran away, and Liz saw a glowing silver handprint on her stomach, she knew she had to find out the truth.

Max soon told her the truth, an unbelievable story that would pull Liz and her friends into drama, danger, romance, and an interstellar conflict. Max and his friends were aliens...

July 1947: In the desert outside Roswell, New Mexico, an alien spaceship crashed to the ground. The government soon swooped in to quarantine the site, issuing a press release that the wreckage of a flying disk had been recovered. Hours later, the press release was rescinded, and the government claimed it was actually a weather balloon.

But the government had in its possession... for a short time... material from the crash, including eight gestation pods. Those pods were later liberated from the government by the two aliens who survived the crash. Four of the pods were placed in a desert cave... along with alien technology known as the Granilith... and were watched over by the alien who came to call himself Nasedo, a Mesaliko Indian word meaning "visitor. "

The other four pods were taken to New York by the other alien, who took human form as Kal Langley. But after Langley got involved in the film industry, he attempted to become more human, and left his pod charges to gestate on their own.

Nasedo watched over the pods in Roswell, but spent much of his time hunting down and killing those who investigated the Roswell crash. In 1989, three of the pods broke open, and a trio of seemingly human six-year-old children emerged. Wandering toward the highway, two of them were found and adopted by Phillip and Diane Evans, and who named them Max and Isabel. The third child was adopted into an abusive foster family and was given the name Michael Guerin.

As the children matured, they learned they shared uncanny powers, and the strange memories of their emergence from the pods led them to question their origins. It wasn't until their teen years that they began to discover the larger truth about themselves. And their revelation to Liz Parker of their identities started them on their path...

1999: Max, Isabel, and Michael discovered that they were part of the "Royal Four" from the warring star system of Antar. There, Max had been King Zan; Isabel had been his sister, Vilandra; Michael had been his second-in-command, Rath; and Ava had been his wife.

Ava was the occupant of the fourth pod, but she had been raised separately from the others by Nasedo. As a teen, she was reintroduced into their lives as Tess Harding. Max, Isabel, Michael, and Tess were not fully human, or fully alien. Their genetic makeup mixed elements of both, giving them special powers. Max could heal others, Isabel could "dreamwalk" into human minds, Michael could wield destructive or defensive energy, and Ava could "mindwarp" others into seeing or doing what she wanted. They all could manipulate molecular structure to some extent.

Following Max's healing of Liz, others soon found out about the existence of the alien-human hybrids among them. Liz's friend Maria DeLuca fell for the bad-boy antics of Michael, even though their relationship was rocky. Mutual friend Alex Whitman was attracted to Isabel, though she didn't return his affection. Sheriff Jim Valenti started out as a nemesis to the kids, but soon came to understand that they needed protection more than exposure, especially after Max

healed Jims son, Kyle, preventing his death from a gunshot wound.

The Roswell teens would come to learn that they had many enemies. A classified government group known as the Special Unit went to great lengths to capture them especially after Nasedo killed several of its top agents. And other aliens from the Antarian system had come to Earth to kill the Royal Four; chief among them were the "Skins," who could renew their essences using human bodies, which they called "husks. "

Meanwhile, the second set of pods had been opened in New York, and the four alien teens there grew up bitter, angry, and tough. After Rath and Vilandra (calling herself "Lonnie") killed Zan, they brought Ava with them to Roswell in an attempt to broker an interstellar peace using Max as a pawn. Their gambit didn't work, however.

Following the death of Nasedo, Tess moved up her plan to work a deal with Antarian forces on her own. She manipulated Max into sleeping with her, then became pregnant with his alien child. She also mindwarped Alex into helping her, eventually killing him in the process. When she was exposed as a murderess, Tess used the Granilith to return to Antar to give Max's heir to his enemies. The reasons behind her treachery remained a mystery.

Desperate to recover his child, Max became unpredictable. He tracked down Kal Langley and forced him to help Max try to return to Antar, but they were unsuccessful. Isabel, rebelling against Max's orders that none of the aliens get further involved with humans, married the man she had been secretly dating, Jesse Ramirez. Michael grew restless under Max's unfocused leadership and attempted to take control of the group himself. And Tess eventually returned with Max's child, which had been rejected on Antar since it was fully human.

In spring 2002 everything came to a boiling point. 1 Special Unit was closing in, gathering evidence a teens. In an attempt to redeem herself, Tess blew up the nearby military base, but this caused further complications for the group. Max sent his child away so he could live safely with a human family, and the group found itself on the run from Roswell, traveling in a VW Microbus.

Max, Liz, Isabel, Michael, Maria, and Kyle now travel the country, trying to help others along the way. Max and Liz have finally married, but their happiness is tinged with hardship. They are all still pursued by the Special Unit, the Skins, and other aliens hidden among the human race. Even though they escaped Roswell, they cannot escape the forces arrayed against them...

I he storage locker's corrugated metal door had seen better days. When Quinn touched it, it rattled like a chain dragged by a ghost.

"So you lost your keys again, huh?" Rafferty asked, shaking his head as he pulled the pry bar from his tool belt and stuck it into the padlock. The lock gleamed like it was brand new.

Quinn wondered how many times the aging, spike-haired punker was going to repeat his little mantra about the keys. "Yeah, Rafe," he said tartly. "I lost my key again. Or the lock's seized up. Or maybe I just like watching a manly guy like you forcing doors open. Take your pick. So you gonna open it up or not? "

Quinn might have broken into the locker himself, without any help from the man in charge of the storage facility. But too many uncomfortable questions would have arisen if Rafferty had caught him at it.

Rafe held up his free hand, as if fending off Quinn's words. "Okayokayokay. Don't need a loada mouth outta you. "

"Likewise," Quinn said, leaning against the cinder-block wall and lighting another unfiltered cigarette. He knew he needed to keep calm. The cache of drugs and automatic weapons Mr. Conroy had stashed here would set him up for the rest of the decade. If his deal with Nasr went down by tonight, before any of Conroy's other guys realized what Quinn had done.

Mr. Conroy sure doesn't need the stuff anymore himself, Quinn thought, hoping nobody would find what was left of his former boss before he'd fled the country and was safely set up in a beachfront estate on Grand Cayman.

Rafferty's close-cropped, dyed-blond hair bristled like the quills of an angry porcupine. "Yer damn lucky I don't stand on ceremony, kid. I could always decide to enforce the 'no key, no get in' rule, ya know. "

Unimpressed, Quinn blew a cloud of smoke into the other man's face. "Yeah, Rafe. And I could always decide to tell the cops about some of the unsavory characters you're in the habit of doing business with. "

"More unsavory than you?" Rafferty said, his eyes narrowing. Quinn wondered for a moment whether he was going to raise the pry bar and try to brain him with it. Then, with a sullen scowl, the punker twisted the bar forcefully. The padlock shattered into countless tiny pieces, which rained down onto the concrete.

"Good work, Rafe," Quinn said, favoring Rafferty with a lopsided grin as he grabbed the storage locker's door handle. "You ought to consider going pro. "

Rafferty only watched in silence as Quinn pulled upward on the rust-and-graffiti-covered door.

It wouldn't budge.

"Is there another lock somewhere on this thing?" Quinn said after a second unsuccessful try at rolling the door upward.

Rafferty swore under his breath, then elbowed Quinn aside. The punker pulled upward on the door handle, his far thicker muscles straining against his mustard-splotched T-shirt. The door began slowly rolling upward, shrieking and squealing in protest all the while until it finally came to a halt, jammed maybe three feet off the ground.

Quinn made a rude gesture at the stubborn door. He'd never had this kind of trouble getting it open when he and the guys had stashed the goodies in here for Mr. Conroy. It's almost like something in there doesn't want to be found.

The punk yanked again at the door, which remained stubbornly immobile. He stopped and wiped the sweat from his brow. "Dunno if I really want to see what you're keeping in here, anyway. "

"Then don't look," Quinn said, getting onto his back so he could slide under the partially open door. Though he hadn't anticipated having to crawl into the storage locker, he'd come prepared with a flashlight, mainly to make sure he didn't overlook anything of value that might have been tucked into one of the storage shed's dark corners.

Rafferty started crawling in after him, shining a flashlight of his own into the darkness. "Uh-uh. This place belongs to me. If you or your boss has turned this space into something outta Silence o' the Lambs, then I wanna know about it. Before the cops show up askin' questions' Quinn thought about that for a moment. Rafferty usually could be counted on to look the other way when it came to contraband... especially when he knew that said contraband was shortly to disappear from the premises. And Quinn wasn't fool enough to stash Conroy's body here. At this moment, Mr. C's getting up dose and personal with the East River 's marine life, he thought.

"Suit yourself," Quinn said aloud. He rose to his feet once he was all the way inside the dark chamber and shined the flashlight around at the heaps of crates and boxes that lined the walls and covered much of the concrete floor.

There seemed to be a lot more crates and boxes in there than he'd remembered. Quinn realized that this might take a lot longer than he'd anticipated. Then, with a curse, he understood why.

"Hey, I don't think all of this stuff is mine," Quinn said. Hastily, he added, "I mean, Mr. Conroy's. "

In the crossed beams of the two flashlights, Quinn could see that Rafferty hadn't noticed his slip. In fact, the punker now looked somewhat guilty.

Quinn moved closer to Rafferty. The punker might have been

bigger, but he was also pretty easy to intimidate. "Hey, Rafe, you been doubling up on storage spaces again? "

"I hadda move some stuff around, just for this week. I was running out of space, and I had some paying customers to please. I gotta make a living, too, you know. "

"Maybe you'd like to explain that to Mr. Conroy," Quinn said, enjoying making the punk squirm. Sure, Mr. C was dead, but Rafferty didn't know that yet.

Quinn saw Rafferty's eyes go as wide as pizza pans, even in the semidarkness. "Nothing's gone missing, man. I promise. It was just, you know, a temporary move, that's all. I just pushed your stuff farther back into the shed, behind some of these crates from that Langley outfit. "

"Langley?" Quinn said, feeling a jolt of dread. "Sounds like FBI to me. "

Rafferty emitted a dismissive chortle. "Langley 's some Hollywood guy, you dope. Actors and musicians and like that. "

Gotta stop jumping at shadows, Quinn thought, rubbing his jaw. But as he considered the stuck metal door, his suspicions rose again. If Rafe really just finished moving all this stuff in here, then why all this trouble getting the damn door open? When he shone his light toward the ceiling he immediately saw the problem. One of the stacks of crates was piled so high that it interfered with the track into which the shed's upward-rolling metal door was supposed to slide.

Sticking the flashlight into the pocket of his black leather jacket, Quinn began climbing the stack of boxes. Rafferty shined his flashlight beam on him as he ascended. Once he reached the top crate, which was maybe ten feet off the concrete floor, he gave it a good hard shove. It didn't move very far.

"Hollywood, my ass," he said. He shoved the crate again, harder this time, and it scooted away from him by about a foot. The crate immediately beneath it shifted a little as well.

Suddenly, the top two crates were teetering on the edge of the stack.

"Hey! I didn't tell you to start an avalanche! "

"And Mr. Conroy didn't tell you to fill his space up with stuff that doesn't belong here," Quinn said, and shoved again before jumping clear.

The top two crates toppled over and hit the hard concrete with a resounding crash, their heavy wooden lids flying off with the force of the impact. The echoes of the collision almost drowned out Rafferty's no doubt pungent. curses as Quinn moved to the now-unobstructed door, which he opened fully to let in the daylight. Then he glanced back at one of the two smashed-open crates.

What the hell? Quinn moved toward the crates, kneeling to peer inside. What he saw reminded him of Mork & Mindy, his favorite sitcom. Only this wasn't a giant egg. "Mork, calling Orson," he whispered.

Ava floated blissfully. The entire universe was dark, silent, utterly peaceful.

Then came a sensation of falling, an eternally slow tumble followed by a bone-jarring impact.

And harsh, all-encompassing light.

Using her hands to shield her eyes from the brilliance, she began tentatively to survey her surroundings. She was on her back in a confined space, surrounded by gently sloping walls composed of something translucent. A thick, moist, greenish membrane enveloped over her body. Her environment felt comfortable, familiar.

But the harsh voices she heard speaking just outside those walls sounded anything but. The language was alien to her ears, yet she somehow was making herself understand it. It was almost as though she were able to glimpse directly into the minds of the speakers.

"Well, what have we here? Pod people?" said one of the voices. One of the membranous walls was abruptly torn away, allowing more light to dazzle her still-sensitive eyes.

Squinting against the glare, she saw a pair of faces: men, one in dark apparel, the other wearing something white but soiled.

"It's a girl, can't be more than ten or eleven. And in her birthday suit, too," said the white-garbed man. He looked as surprised as Ava felt. He turned and spoke brusquely to the dark-clad man. "I thought you said you and yer boss din't do this kinda crime, man. "

"We don't, you dope," said the dark-garbed one. "Lookit, Rafe, she's alive. "

"Well, how the hell'd she get in here, Quinn? And what's this green glop she's been sleeping in? Looks like something outta Alien." The white-shirted man reached toward the moist membrane that still covered her, then abruptly drew his hand back in revulsion. "This is disgusting! "

"Watch it!" the other man said, stepping back. "You almost splashed that stuff all over me. This leather jacket cost me a bundle. "

White shirt glared at Black Leather Jacket. "How'd she get in here?" he repeated.

Black Leather Jacket shrugged, then helped Ava get to her feet. The membrane cover around her began oozing, and she wriggled as it sloughed off onto the floor. The white-clad man freed a gray tarp from atop a nearby pallet of boxes, then draped the rough fabric around Ava's naked shoulders. Black Leather steadied her, his callused hands on her shoulders. She shivered, finding his touch repellent.

His hands still clamped onto her shoulders, Black Leather spoke to his companion as though Ava wasn't even present. "You're the one's been moving stuff around in here, Rafe. You tell me how she got here. And why was she in that crate? "

"It's God's own mystery, man. I just stash what my customers bring me. It don't pay to ask too many questions about what's in the crates. Know what I mean? "

The hard floor was cold beneath Ava's feet. She looked around the narrow but high-ceilinged room, a place of poured concrete and concrete blocks, with a rolling metal door that was up completely, letting in the full brightness of the midmorning sun.

It's not the sun oJAntar. I have been brought very far from home. Frustratingly, she could not recall just how this could have come to pass. Or who might have been responsible.

At her feet, amid a tangle of splintered wooden debris, lay a trio of green-tinted translucent pods identical to the one from which Black Leather had just freed her. Though they were as yet unopened, she could see that each one contained a small, slumbering form, not unlike the strange body she now occupied.

Gazing at the three other motionless figures, she felt a stir of memory, though it was confused and sluggish. How long had she lain dormant... gestating?... in that pod? Confused or not, the memory was insistent. The Royal Four. I am one of them. And those three have to be the others.

"Judging from what's in these crates, Rafe, we got three more of these... pod kids on our hands," Black Leather jacket was saying. "They sure look human, but how did they... "

"Our" hands? No way, man," the other said, interrupting. "If your boss is into buying and selling kids, that's his business. But I don't want no part of it." Soiled White Shirt Man started for the open door.

Black Leather suddenly released Ava, and she almost fell. She watched as he stepped quickly into Soiled White Shirt Man's path, grabbing his shoulder.

"Where do you think you're going, Rafe? "

"Where d'you think, man? To the cops. You wanna run blow and guns through my place... discreetly... that's one thing. You start peddlin' flesh, that's somethin' else completely. "

Black Leather's hand moved quickly, and a long knife appeared in it, as if by magic. White Shirt's eyes went wide. There was a blur of motion, an arc of splattering crimson. A moment later, Black Leather and Ava were the only two people in the little room capable of standing. The other man crumpled to the floor, his legs convulsing as a dark, red liquid streamed from his wound and formed a slowly expanding puddle around him. She knew it was White Shirt's life-

blood.

She studied the bloody knife, still clutched in his hand, as he approached. It was the most dangerous-looking thing she could recall ever having seen, either here... wherever here was... or back home on Antar.

She could not recall ever having felt so helpless during her former life. Or was that somebody else's life? It was so hard to be certain of anything, except for her need to get away from the man with the knife.

Her eyes flicked toward the other three pods, still scattered about the floor. She thought of her king, and her destiny. Zan must be in one of them. He has to be.

Black Leather wiped the knife clean on an edge of the tarp that Ava wore, making her wish she could find her voice and scream. She recalled that she should be able to do something to make this evil creature go away. But she had no idea at the moment how she might go about doing that.

Folding and pocketing his blade, Black Leather said, "My... former associate there made a good point. True, selling kiddies is a little outta my main line of work, but I'm sure I can find a willing buyer for you and your three friends." He held up his hands and crooked his fingers, motioning in the air. "You could be starring in some special 'movies' real soon." His grin was more of a leer now.

Ava started when she heard something moving behind Black Leather. He quickly turned his head toward the sound.

The other pods were stirring. The naked forms within struggled against the soft, translucent walls.

Black Leather shrugged and knelt beside the nearest pod, which was opening slowly, like some strange flower. A blond-haired girl of about Ava's age was becoming conscious, clawing at the gestational membrane that was her body's only covering. In the pod beside her, a dark-haired boy did the same.

Zan! Ava thought when she saw the boy. And Vilandra! She knew them instinctively, even though their present forms were so different from the ones she knew. They were younger than Black Leather, their skin unwrinkled and pink, rather than gray. Their eyes and heads were a great deal smaller and hairier than their native Antarian forms. Relief and elation swept through her at the sight of them; maybe their presence was a sign that there was a way out of this situation that wouldn't involve any further bloodshed.

In far less time than it had taken Ava, Zan was standing confidently, watching the Black Leather man. Vilandra seemed to take a few moments longer to adjust to her surroundings.

Zan looked deliberately toward Ava, then spoke in Old High

Antarian. "My knowledge of how the jour oj us cam here is incomplete. But I believe we were released prematurely from these... gestational chambers. I need to know why. "

Her hand shaking, Ava pointed at Black Leather. "Ask him. He is the one responsible for that. As well as for the death of that being." She gestured toward the bloody corpse that lay on the floor.

Zan looked toward the dead man, then regarded Black Leather with a defiance that Ava could only describe as regal.

"What do you want of us?" Zan said, standing between Black Leather and the two girls.

"Great," Black Leather, said, rolling his bloodshot eyes skyward. The knife suddenly returned to his hand, gleaming in the sunlight. "Not only was my latest merchandise over-nighted in on a flying saucer, but it speaks freakin' Klingon, too. Where you from, Tattooine? France? "

He wants to take us as slaves, Ava thought. But first he has to frighten us. She could tell from her relentless shivering that Black Leather's tactic was working very well indeed, at least on her. She despised herself for her timidity.

"Put the knife down," Zan commanded.

Black Leather advanced confidently toward the Antai>-ian king. Though Zan now wore the body of an alien child, he didn't flinch. Instead, he crouched slightly, adopting a knees-bent, combat-ready stance.

Black Leather laughed, though his knife remained pointed straight at Zan's heart.

Please, Ava thought helplessly. Must anyone else die here today? Frantic to find a way out, her eyes lit on the fourth pod, which had lain unnoticed a few feet away during the emergence of Zan and Vilandra.

The shape that had been slumbering within the farthest pod was gone. This time, Ava tried not to telegraph her reaction "Lower the weapon," Zan said to Black Leather, and raised an admonishing hand. "You will not be warned again. "

"Whatever. Maybe you just need a little of the universal language," the thug said, and slashed at the air near Zan's right ear.

The young king continued to stand his ground. "So be it. You have made your choice. Now you must live with it. "

"Or die with it. "

Everyone turned toward the new voice, which seemed to be coming from the depths of the storage shed, an area still cloaked in shadows. A moment later, another naked male child emerged into the light. He was blond, appeared to be about the same age as the others, and seemed, 1 Zan, to fear nothing. So strange, Ava thought, to see

such old souls bound up in the bodies of mere children.

The blond boy approached the knife-wielding man without hesitation. Not only did his mien continue to radiate boldness, it seemed to have little room for other emotions, save barely constrained rage. She wondered just how much of Black Leather's violence he had witnessed.

The youth smiled at the knife wielder. It was a warrior's grin, and Ava felt a chill when she recognized it.

Rath. He must have slipped out of his pod unnoticed.

"Hold, General," Zan commanded, addressing Rath.

Rath continued walking toward Black Leather, halting only a few feet away from him.

"Okay, this is getting truly weird," said the man with the knife, looking all around him. He had the air of a man who was rapidly losing control of circumstances. "How many more of you Children of the Damned are hiding out in here? Is this some sort of clubhouse for you naked little freaks, or what? "

"You've threatened the person of the king," Rath said, his eyes focused like lasers upon Black Leather.

"Stand down, General," Zan told Rath. "I will handle this. "

Rath behaved as though he hadn't even heard Zan. Still looking Black Leather in the eye, he said, "No one threatens the king, or any of the Royal Four. Not while I live. "

He raised a hand.

"No!" shouted Zan and Ava in unison. Vilandra merely smiled appreciatively at Rath. She had obviously recognized her predestined mate, despite their strangely altered forms.

Black Leather tried to swing his knife arm toward Rath, to no avail. The man was suddenly frozen, like an insect trapped in tree-resin, his eyes widened in fear. Rath made a slashing gesture with his hand, releasing a burst of dazzling light and potent energies. The man flew headfirst into the cinder-block wall, a human projectile.

Ava saw the gray-and-scarlet ruin that had been the knife-man's head. She wondered if he'd had time to feel pain before the end had come.

Rath calmly walked to where Black Leather lay, and helped himself to the dead man's coat. The boy passed a still-glowing hand over the garment's collar and lapels, which had been fouled by blood. A moment later, the coat was spotless.

Zan wasted no time confronting him. "That was not necessary, Rath. I could have disarmed him easily. "

Rath didn't respond immediately; he seemed preoccupied with the act of helping himself to the dead man's trousers and boots. His hands glowing, he used his innate power to resize the garments. In moments,

they were a near-perfect fit for his smaller form.

Picking up the dead man's knife, Rath finally looked Zan in the eye. "He might have come after you later, if we'd let him live. This creature was too dangerous for mercy. "

"I decide on the Royal Four's actions, Rath. Not you," Zan said.

"Zan is right," Vilandra said, pointing toward the ruined skull of the man Rath had just slain. She sounded disappointed that she'd had to take the king's side in this dispute. "If this... creature still lived, we might have pulled something useful from out of its mind. "

An idea occurred to Ava then. Walking carefully around the wreckage of the crates and the opened gestation pods, she crossed to the body of the white-garbed man whom the knife-wielder had slain. Forcing aside the sick feeling in her gut, she knelt beside the body and touched its still-warm forehead.

Rath didn't seem to notice what Ava was doing. "Forgive me," he said to Vilandra in a sneering tone. "It didn't occur to me to negotiate with the local wildlife. "

Ava looked down at her hands. Like Rath's, they now glowed with raw, unfocused power. We are still but children on this world. It will probably take us some time to master our Antarian gifts again.

But she knew there wouldn't be any time for that. They were out of the safety of their gestation pods, ready or not. They were naked and defenseless in a strange place, and they needed help now.

As carefully as she could, Ava reached out with her mind, gently probing whatever wisps remained of the dead man's thoughts.

It was as though she'd fallen into an erupting volcano. Though his body no longer breathed, his brain, now in the midst of shutting down, was a frenetic beehive of activity. She was caught in a whirlpool of memories. School, language, parents, lovers, children, music, history, maps... The onslaught was relentless, a gale-force blizzard of disjointed thought. A brilliant light silently called out to her, tugging at her with an inexplicable gravity. She screamed, suddenly fearful that the dying man was dragging her to her own destruction. Her mind scrabbled desperately away from the light, seeking the shelter of darkness.

When she came back to herself, Ava was sitting on the floor. Zan, Vilandra, and Rath knelt at her side, concern etched across their youthful-yet-ancient faces.

After glancing at the still form of the man whose death had nearly taken her life as well, Ava looked questioningly toward Zan.

He shook his head sadly, then spoke in the Old High Tongue. "I feel that I should be able to, but I can't heal him. "

"I hope his death was not in vain," she replied.

Rath scowled. "This world is probably filled with death. Best to

get used to it now. “

"What were you able to learn?" Zan asked Ava, ignoring Rath's harshness.

Willing her chin not to tremble, Ava took Zan's and Vilandra's hands. Vilandra and Zan also clasped hands with Rath, completing the circle. "I think I've absorbed at least one of the main local languages. Let me pass it along to all of you." Ava reached out with her mind. She felt a charge of indescribable energy coursing away from her body, through her friends, and back again.

Zan nodded, and the foursome released one another's hands. When he spoke after a long pause, it was in the tongue Ava had heard the two dead men speak. "I think we all know this place now... this New York City... as well as any of the locals do. “

Only then did Ava notice that all four of them were now wearing clothing similar to that of the leather-clad man whom Rath had killed. She glanced inquisitively at Rath, who still wore the slain man's garments. He shrugged and looked embarrassed.

Also in this world's native tongue, Vilandra said, "Before you woke up, Rath transmuted that nasty tarp you were wearing into something a little more appropriate for us all... or at least he tried to. “

Zan examined his own leather-and-denim ensemble, which Ava thought made him look both dangerous and vaguely ridiculous. He seemed to have forgiven Rath for his earlier indiscretion. "I'm not sure how well we're going to fit in here, dressed like this. “

"Give me a break," Rath said. "A minute ago, I didn't even know I had that power. You were expecting Madison Avenue on my very first try?" Ava was impressed at how quickly Rath had picked up some of the local idioms.

Ava suddenly remembered an image she had seen in the knifed man's dying mind. Panic surged within her. "Other people are going to be coming here soon. Cowork-ers. Customers. We have to get out of this place. Now. “

Zan pointed to the wreckage on the floor. "We can't just leave the pods lying here. Someone might trace them to us. “

"So?" Vilandra asked.

"There is too much we don't yet understand about this world, sister. We should take no unnecessary risks. “

"We'll just take the pods along with us," Ava said, knowing how lame that sounded, Zan's approval notwithstanding. After all, the pods were large and heavy, at least in comparison with four small, relatively weak bodies.

Rath threw up his hands and glared at Ava. "Fine. Where do you propose we drag the pods off to? We can't exactly check into the

Waldorf. “

Ava suddenly felt more of the dead man's memories stirring and moving within the depths of her mind. All at once, they came into sharper focus. Turning to Zan, she said, "There's a big storm drain in the back parking lot. It leads down into the sewers. We could drag the pods down there and keep them out of sight. “

Vilandra looked horrified. "The sewers. “

"It's better than having more of those taking an interest in us," Ava said, pointing at the dead knife-man. "If we leave the pods here, that's almost sure to happen. “

Rath smiled savagely. Raising a glowing fist, he said, "Bring 'em on. “

"The sewers?" Vilandra repeated. "You can't be serious. The freaking sewers? “

Zan began pushing one of the gestation pods toward the open door. Apparently satisfied that it was far lighter than it appeared, he turned back to face the group. "If others are coming, let's avoid confrontation," he said, to Ava's immense relief. "The sewers it is. “

Both Vilandra and Rath made sour faces, but didn't argue further.

"You the man, Zan," Rath said.

Ava found his unpleasant smirk uncomfortably similar to that of the predator he had slain. Bad enough they were encased in unfamiliar human bodies; were they susceptible to a transfer of personality traits as well? How else is this cursed world going to change us?

<i>2 Cheyenne, Wyoming. Fall 2002.</i>
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Mom and Dad-Just time to send you a quick e-mail before we get on the road again. Hope all is well with you. I hope business is good at the Crashdown. I figure you're probably doing okay, even *without* your two best waitresses and cook. Ha-ha!;) It's been so long since I've seen either of you. I miss you both. Someday, maybe it will be safe enough for us to come back for a visit, but right now I think it's still way too dangerous. I can't really talk about where we are or what we've been doing lately, since everyone is scared that the bad guys from the government will track us down somehow. Even though all my best friends are here, it's kind of lonely without my family and all the familiar Roswell landmarks. And I've started to realize-well, we all have-how important it was to be safe at home, and just how much Sheriff Valenti really was our guardian angel.

Speaking of that, please tell him "Hi" for us. Is he still going out with Maria's mom? She's dying to know, but since you guys can't e-mail us back, I guess we won't find out.

Max and I are doing well, though sometimes it's still hard to believe we're actually married. We don't get a lot of privacy or anything, since we're always traveling with the others. I know that Michael and Maria have talked about marriage too, but Michael's so noncommittal (he's gotten a lot more mature over the past few weeks, but Michael is still Michael), and Maria won't commit to someone so noncommittal, so there's not much progress there. ;) I feel bad for Isabel, since she's away from Jesse. She and Kyle are the only two "single" members of our group, which doesn't leave Kyle with a lot of choices, and that also means that Isabel is moody a lot of the time. I know I'd be pretty cranky if Max and I were pulled apart the way Iz and Jesse have been.

Some of us look a little different now, to help us hide out from anyone chasing us. But I can't tell you what we look like, just in case anyone is reading this e-mail other than you. I'll just say that all the guys look as good as Brad Pitt now, and we girls look good enough to get modeling contracts. Ha-ha! And if anyone else *is* reading this e-mail leave us alone. Please. None of us have hurt anyone. We just want to live normal lives. Leave us alone.

So anyhow, like last time, I'm only using this e-mail address once, so you won't be able to respond to it, and the Men in Black won't be able to trace us. I know that sometime in the future we'll be able to talk again, and (I hope) even see each other soon, face to face. Pausing in her typing, Liz Parker looked up. She watched as Maria DeLuca, sitting on a stool over from her in the cramped confines of the Cybernet Cafe, composed a hasty electronic note of her own. Liz let herself be hypnotized for a moment by the rhythmically blinking cursor. Then Maria broke the spell by hitting the "Send" button. Maria's e-mail immediately disappeared into cyberspace.

"You're all done?" Liz asked, unnecessarily.

Maria ran her hand through her newly wavy hair and leaned backward in her chair. "Looks that way. There's not much I can really tell Mom. I mean, what am I going to do... talk about encounters with yet another race of 'Czechoslovakians' and haunted mansions full of Skins?" She snorted. "I bet she's probably wearing a whole necklace-full of healing crystals to help with the headaches she must have started getting after our departure from Ros..." She abruptly caught herself, then glanced quickly around the room as though scanning for spies. "From the town, I mean," she finished a beat later.

Seated a few stools away, Kyle Valenti looked up from his computer monitor. His wavy brown hair fell slightly into his angular

face as he looked first toward the girls, then focused on a point in space beyond them. From the way he motioned with his head, Liz could see that something had caught his interest. He mouthed something they couldn't hear, but she lip-read two familiar words: Pod Squad.

Liz and Maria turned toward the front of the Cybernet Cafe to see their three companions striding in. Max Evans was in the lead, flanked by his sister, Isabel, and his best friend, Michael Guerin. They always look like they're striding off to war when they walk in as a trio, Liz thought. Maybe it comes naturally to them.

Of course, Liz was well aware that what was natural for these three seemingly ordinary teenagers was, in fact, rather otherworldly. Their true home was a planet called Antar, part of a solar system that had five inhabited planets. Zan had been the ruler of Antar, and his family dynasty had united the five worlds. Although Zan was well respected, there were many who felt his policies and agendas reached too far. One of those who opposed King Zan was Kivar, a general who had become an Antarian senator. Kivar spearheaded the conspiracy that overthrew Zan's empire, killing the king... as well as Zan's sister, Vilandra, his second-in-command, Rath, and his wife, Ava.

Sometime during the war that followed, the DNA of the "Royal Four"... the genetic templates for re-creating Antar's rightful leaders... was brought to Earth. Here, a faction loyal to King Zan had used a semisentient organism called Gan-darium to incorporate human DNA into that of the Royal Four. The resulting hybrid embryos were still clones of Zan, Vilandra, Rath, and Ava... except that they appeared to be human.

But despite outward appearances, Liz could never overlook the fact that her husband, Max... who was heir to the late King Zan's DNA as well as his throne... was not fully human. Neither were Isabel and Michael, who carried in them the genes of Vilandra and Rath. Liz knew she could never escape that knowledge. Four years ago, Max had healed her after she was accidentally shot at the Crashdown Cafe, which her parents operated in Roswell, New Mexico. On that fateful day, Max's healing touch had transferred some of his alien essence into her; as a result, she now sometimes manifested extra-normal powers.

Now they were on the run from the government, after one too many government investigations into the presence of aliens in Roswell had brought to light a host of unusual occurrences. They had been forced to change their appearances, to use fake names, to travel in a van together, and to be constantly on the watch for potential captors.

So, maybe they're right to be walking like they're going to war, Liz thought, still watching Max, Isabel, and Michael. And maybe I

should be right there with them, with my husband. But in her heart, Liz knew she already was fighting alongside her husband. She and Maria and Kyle were risking their lives every day, just by remaining with the group.

"Are you almost done?" Max asked, keeping his voice low. He quickly looked around the cafe to see if anyone was paying attention to them. The plump woman in the floral print muumuu wasn't, nor was the counter helper, who seemed to be playing some kind of game on his computer.

"Yeah, just finishing up," Liz said.

"I just sent mine," Maria said, gesturing toward the e-mail program still running on her terminal.

Max looked over at Kyle, who grinned and shrugged slightly. "I finished quite a while ago," he said. "So I've been surfing the free adult sites. "

"How special," Isabel said, her words dripping with sarcasm.

"Would you hurry up, Liz?" Michael said. "We can't afford to be on these things any longer than necessary. "

Liz glared at him and turned back to her screen. She typed quickly, finishing her last sentence: Gotta go. Love you lots. Liz.

Then she clicked "Send." As soon as the system confirmed her message was sent, she hit the quit command, exiting the program...

Liz noticed Isabel pacing behind her. "This isn't fair, you know?" Isabel said, keeping her voice measured and low, but adding just enough venom to make it clear that she was unhappy. "I'm forbidden to talk to Jesse by e-mail or phone, and yet they can talk to their parents. "

"We've talked about this already, Iz," Max said. "Jesse made it seem like he made a clean break from you when he went to Boston. If he heard from you regularly, it would put him in danger too. "

"I think it's stupid for any of you to be contacting anyone back in Roswell," Michael said. "The parental units can survive without hearing from us for a while. "

"So says the guy who doesn't have any family or friends other than us," Kyle said, half under his breath.

Michael immediately shot Kyle a dirty look, but it was Maria who spoke up in Michael's defense. "Real nice, Mr. Congeniality. Chalk up some sensitivity points on your Buddha-belt for that one. "

"Hey, I said 'other than us,'" Kyle protested. "I didn't mean anything nasty by it. "

Liz knew that Max was about to step in as peacekeeper, and sure enough, before Kyle had even finished speaking, Max strode forward, hands up, palms out. "Guys, let's cool it. Kyle, are you sure your dad is still keeping that encryption code going? "

"Yeah, I'm sure," Kyle said, clicking down on the docking bar to open an Internet browser window. He quickly typed in a URL, and the Web page for the Roswell Sheriffs Department opened. Clicking on several submenus brought him to a page labeled "Deputy James Valenti," on which a picture of the smiling former head sheriff of Roswell appeared.

Placing the mouse pointer over the badge on his father's chest, Kyle said, "See, here's the portal in." He clicked on the secret link and was sent to another page, this one with an error message on it. He added a slash and the name Kyle to the URL on the error page, and another page popped up. This one showed only text, a string of complicated-looking computer code.

With his finger, Kyle pointed to the code on the string. "Every sixth letter is the code," he said. "He's kept it changed every time we send him something. He's making sure to cover his tracks and ours. No one will find us this way. "

Roswell, New Mexico A few months earlier, shortly after the "incident" at the West Roswell High School graduation ceremonies on June 1, 2002, the members of the federal government's secretive Special Unit had met in a safe house forty miles southwest of Roswell, on the way to the town of Elk. To any member of the public, the clandestine meeting site appeared to be nothing more than a large ranch house whose absentee owners didn't often visit.

In actuality, the dwelling had previously been a temporary home for several members of the Witness Protection Program, and the acreage behind the house held more than a few secrets... as well as bodies... dating back to 1947.

The de facto leaders of the Unit... at least those concerned with this particular operation... were the pair who had tried to kill the alien quartet during graduation. Matthew Margolin, code-named "Viceroy," was in his late fifties, his hair gone gray, but his body still strong and whipcord lean. His face bore the scars of past covert missions; he could have had some of them fixed with plastic surgery, but he chose to think of them as a testament to his survival skills. He was alive. His opponents weren't.

Margolin's second-in-command was Dale Bartolli... or at least that was the name he was using these days. Bartolli had the look of a wolverine, with fierce dark eyes, a predatory grin, and slicked-back, thinning hair. In his younger days he had been a Navy SEAL, but he had been recruited for Black Ops wetwork during the late 1980s. Margolin often fancied himself as cool and emotionless about his work as it was possible for an operative to be, but even he sometimes visibly got goose bumps in Bartolli's presence.

At the meeting, various members of the Special Unit presented

their surveillance files on the Parker, Evans, DeLuca, and Valenti households, as well as on the UFO Center where Max Evans had worked, and the dossier on Max Evans's boss, Brody Davis, the owner of the UFO Center.

After a thorough review of the files, the group concluded that the six teens who had fled Roswell had likely not had any contact with their families, at least through any conventional methods. All phone lines had been tapped, most of their rooms had been bugged, and every known e-mail address used by any of the families had been trapped with a recursive program. One agent was always on constant surveillance of the spy devices. Just in case, Margolin thought, E. T. tries to phone home.

The one fly in the ointment appeared to be Deputy Valenti, the ex-sheriff of the town. Valenti had already "made" two of the Special Unit's agents, and he clearly knew that surveillance was still ongoing. And although his house had been easy enough to watch, the Roswell Sheriff's station wasn't quite so easy to bug.

Margolin and his agents discussed briefly arranging an "accident" for Valenti... after taking him in to answer a few questions, of course... but the group consensus was that such a course of action was extreme, at least for the moment. After all, none of the parents had made a move to leave town, and although their private conversations and phone calls to one another were often full of expressions of concern for their kids' safety, they never, ever discussed the alien aspects of their "children. "

"It's almost as if they don't even know," one of the agents had said.

But Margolin knew that the evidence just didn't support that. A videotape of Isabel Evans using telekinetic powers had been recovered from the Evans's VCR during an air force search, and the search dogs had tracked the smell of alien blood to the Valenti and Evans homes just prior to the mass destruction of Rogers Air Force Base by the blond girl they had later identified as Tess Harding, the daughter of a former military consultant who had since gone missing. At minimum, Phillip and Diane Evans and Jim Valenti had to know something.

But whether they knew the whole truth was a legitimate question. Of them all, Valenti seemed the most likely to know all there was to know about the alien nature of the Roswell teens, as well as the complicity of their friends. Valenti had been involved in far too many strange and unexplained circumstances with various members of "The Six," as the fugitive kids were now known, to plead ignorance about them and what they were up to now. He had even lost his job as Roswell 's sheriff because of a case related to the teens, although he had eventually been rehired as a deputy.

"If we're going to find them, it will be Valenti who leads us to them," Margolin said to the other members of the Special Unit, most of whom were nodding in agreement.

"Don't forget," Bartolli said, idly gazing at a gleaming, razor-sharp knife he'd carried with him since his navy days. "Valenti stands to lose his son if he does lead us to those kids. He's gonna take precautions. "

Margolin nodded. "Exactly. So this won't be an easy hunt. "

Bartolli put the knife away, his grin saying, Bring it on.

This time it was the other agent's sharklike smile that made the hairs on the back of Margolin's neck stand on end.

Agent Harrison looked up from the magazine when his computer beeped. He quickly scanned the data on the screen. His storefront office, part of what was ostensibly a realty company, faced the west outer wall of the sheriffs station on East Fifth Street; the window overlooked the parking lot, enabling him to keep track of Valenti's departures and arrivals. The signals from the few bugs and traps they had managed to set up inside the sheriff's station were strong enough to be received here.

The programs the Special Unit was using were beyond cutting-edge. They had been developed by a few of the top hackers in the country, each working independently, each hoping that the "help" they gave the federal government's Office of Total Information Awareness (TIA) would mean leniency for whatever computer crimes they had committed. The task was made easier in the post... September 11 world; even hackers were patriots if they thought they could stop terrorists. And while the programs they developed were already in use for the tracking of human-made terrorist threats, the Special Unit was free to deploy the very same technology in its ongoing effort to trap the aliens who lived among an unsuspecting populace.

Today the TIA surveillance programs were working very well indeed. Quickly, Harrison punched a phone button that gave him a direct line to Director Margolin. Simultaneously, he brought up the file he'd need to send and began scanning all the relevant numbers and map coordinates.

"Yes," came the voice on the other end of the line.

"Sir, I've got them with the encryption trap. They've just transmitted three e-mails from a site in Cheyenne, Wyoming. "

"Good. Alert the FBI field office immediately," Margolin said.

"Already on it," Harrison said. Updated copies of the fugitives' files... which contained photos of the six teens... went to the FBI field office, as well as to both the state and city police departments. Harrison included an e-mail message: To all departments: Suspects in terror plot spotted at "Cybernet Cafe" establishment, 2376 Cypress Avenue, at 1400 hours. Suspects are armed and dangerous, but must

be subdued. No lethal force. Use Bags, trunks, or tasers. Do not interrogate. Press blackout. Call 888-555-2938 with confirmation of capture.

"Sent, sir," Harrison said.

"Send me copies of the three e-mails as soon as you can." "Right away," Harrison said, scrambling to do just that. "Let's hope we catch them this time," Margolin said. "Good work, Harrison. "

The young agent grinned. He hadn't been a part of the Special Unit for very long. This would look very good in his files. He began to read the e-mails he had trapped. Deputy Valenti will never know they'd been intercepted.

Cheyenne, Wyoming Sitting in the cafe between Maria and Isabel, Liz watched Kyle and Michael and wondered if any two people could be more different. Kyle sat behind a computer terminal, a model of Zen calm. Like the Buddha, she thought, if he'd ever tried to find nirvana by surfing naughty Web sites.

Michael, however, didn't appear capable of sitting, as far as Liz could see. He was pacing like a caged tiger.

"They're going to intercept those e-mails," he said. "Just like they've probably bugged the phones. "

"Maybe," said Max, who was leaning in a nearby corner, evidently trying to stay out of Michael's way. "Maybe not. "

Liz spoke up, hoping to reassure both Max and Michael. "There's no way they can do that. Deputy Valenti took plenty of precautions. Besides, I'm pretty sure it's impossible to tap and trace e-mail messages anyway. "

Max didn't look too sure about that. And Michael appeared utterly unconvinced. "A lot of people think aliens are impossible too," Michael said quietly.

"Relax, Michael," Kyle said, grinning, as Michael moved toward the door, looking suspiciously across the quiet open-air mall outside for perhaps the hundredth time. "We're safe as houses here. "

"You know, I never understood that expression, "

Michael said. "Houses blow apart when it gets windy enough outside. We need to get out of here soon." Looking up at the digital clock over the door, he added, "It's 2:02. You guys have five minutes to wrap this up and settle the check. Max and I are going to get some snacks for the road over at the tacqueria. We're almost completely out of Tabasco sauce. "

"Who died and made him king?" Maria said sullenly, as Max and Michael departed the cafe and went outside into the mall courtyard.

Liz gave her friend a look, cocking an eyebrow. "He's your boyfriend. You should be able to tame the wild beast. "

"Oh, we've all had so much time for beast-taming, living in the

back of the van together and driving across the scenic wilds of the Southwest," Maria said. "I bet Max will start getting just as cranky as Michael if the two of you keep getting as little, um, quality time together as Michael and I get. "

Isabel made a pained face and put her hands up, palms out. "Ewwwww, okay? I don't need to hear about it. I haven't even seen my husband for four months, so your problems seem minimal compared with mine. "

"I don't want to hear about it either," Kyle said with a mischievous grin. "Why do you think I'm surfing the adult sites? "

Isabel smacked him in the back of the head as she walked past. "Come on, guys, let's pay up and get out of here. "

Maria turned back to her computer and her mouth shaped into an O of surprise. "Whoops, forgot to log off." Liz gave her a scolding glance as Maria clicked around on her terminal, exited the e-mail program, then erased the temporary files, cache memory, and history from the machine.

"You girls go ahead. I've got three more minutes on my card," Kyle said. He turned back to the computer.

Liz joined Isabel up at the counter, where she noticed that Max's sister had put on her "flirty" face. She smiled engagingly at the male clerk and said, "Hi," in a singsong voice. "How much do my friends owe for their time on the computers? "

The clerk, a skinny, bespectacled, computer-geek type who appeared to be in his late teens, blushed and stammered slightly. "Ummm, six dollars each. "

Isabel fished in her small pocketbook, pulling out two twenty-dollar bills. "We need some ones. Would you mind changing this for me? "

The clerk took the two bills and punched numbers into the cash register. He looked up at Isabel. "Anyone ever tell you that you look like Lara Croft? "

"Only when I wear my hair like this," Isabel said, running her hand under the long French braid into which she'd fashioned her newly darkened hair. "Thanks for noticing." She flashed him a toothy smile.

Liz turned away, rolling her eyes, as the clerk counted out change for Isabel. She looked toward the front of the store, where Maria was standing and looking outside.

Maria turned quickly toward Liz, who saw the alarm on her friend's face immediately. "Liz, we've got trouble! "

Liz rushed over toward the window. Kyle got to his feet and moved forward as well.

Maria pointed down to the lower level of the mall which lay

beyond the balcony. There, Liz saw several men dressed in dark suits... as well as several police officers and security guards... moving quickly through the crowd of afternoon shoppers.

"Oh no," Liz said under her breath. She looked down the balcony toward the coffee shop and saw Max and Michael waiting in line, oblivious to the looming danger. Three stores down, the wall opened up, making way for an escalator. An "up" escalator, Liz observed.

As Isabel came toward the group, Liz said, "We've got to get out of here. And we have to warn Max! "

Then Liz saw a mixed quartet of federal agents and cops coming down the balcony, heading directly toward the Cybernet Cafe. All of them had already drawn their guns.

Liz turned quickly and looked toward the rear of the cafe, searching for a rear exit that wasn't immediately apparent. Her heart lay leaden in her chest.

We're trapped!

<i>3 New York City. Fall, 2002.</i>

V et another bullet whined near Rath, singeing his spiky Mohawk haircut as it passed just an inch or so from his partially shaved skull. The shell's impact sprayed plaster dust through the darkness, making him cough. He dove for cover behind a tall metal rack that was covered with discarded boxes, the mortal remains of automotive parts or plumbing fixtures, or whatever this abandoned warehouse had trafficked in during better days. He knew the flimsy, collapsing shelves and old packages wouldn't provide much protection against the heat those freaks were packing.

He couldn't see them, but he knew they were closing in. Come on, Lonnie, he thought, using the name Vilandra had chosen on Earth. Find the gadget that brought them to Earth, blow it up, and let's all get the hell out of here.

Rath wanted nothing more than to hit the nearest exit... assuming he could find it with the lights off... and run like a rat for the safety of the Manhattan sewers. But if the information Lonnie had given him after her last dreamwalk could be trusted, then they were in the right place. If we can just find the right thing to blow up, he thought, then we can send these bastards back to wherever they came from.

He wondered how the freaks had found and cornered them so quickly. Surely they hadn't traced Lonnie's dreamwalk. As far as he knew, nobody had ever done that before.

Ava had to be the one at fault, he realized. She had never been as good at covering her psionic tracks as Lonnie was. And although Ava had a real knack for reaching inside individual minds and "nudging" them into seeing the world her way, she had always had a tough time handling large, hostile groups. On top of that, Rath couldn't help but wonder whether Ava was still on the same side as he and Lonnie. Ever since Lonnie and 1 tossed Zan in front of that truck, Ava's been harder and harder to keep in line, he thought. Letting her get close to that Evans guy, that other Zan, was a huge mistake.

Or perhaps letting her come back to them months later had been his real mistake.

A moment later, Rath found Ava, nearly tripping over her in the darkness. In the brief illumination of a muzzle flash, he saw her crouching behind one of the metal storage racks, her usually immaculate platinum-and-blue hair now thoroughly mussed and covered with a dusting of white plaster debris from the nearby bullet impacts.

Rath snarled at her. "How fabulous is this? You led them straight to us! "

He felt plaster dust against his skin as she shook her head. "Evil Emperor Zurg's minions are doing their damndest to blow us away and you're blaming me for it? "

"You must have set off an alarm when you brainwiped those guards outside," he said, crouching close to the floor himself. Fortunately, the sun hadn't yet risen, and darkness had always been his friend. But Rath knew they wouldn't stand a chance of escaping if they were still pinned down inside this warehouse after daybreak.

"No way. Lonnie must have set us up," Ava hissed.

Rath didn't want to think about that. After all, Lonnie was his lover as well as his accomplice in Zan's murder. He and Lonnie had no choice but to trust each other. Ava, though, had spent enough time away from both Rath and Lonnie over the past year to place her loyalties in doubt.

"You're a walking bull's-eye, Queenie," Rath said, his jaw set into a hard line. "These bums must've locked onto your latest Jedi mind trick somehow." Whether she'd intended to or not, Rath was certain that Ava had gotten the three of them into a lot of trouble... maybe more than even they could handle.

Another bullet chewed up the wall immediately behind Rath and Ava, coming even more uncomfortably close than any of the others.

"These 'bums' are about to blow great big holes through us, Rath-man," Ava said. "Think we could bookmark this argument for later? "

Rath had to admit that she had a point. Their attackers, of course, were anything but "bums." There were any number of warring

political factions back home on Antar, many of whom temporarily occupied the bodies of Earth humans in order to parley on neutral ground with their adversaries. Some of these Antarians liked to take over the bodies of derelicts or street criminals... people who, like the East Coast Royal Three, weren't likely to be missed by the locals.

A few of these individuals had little reason to surrender their now heavily armed host bodies to their original owners... and even less restraint about placing those bodies at risk.

Strange how these freaks didn't start coming after us until after Ava came back from the desert. She found a whole new kind of trouble out there, and let it follow her home like a bunch of stray cats.

At the moment, Rath guessed that at least a dozen alien-possessed street-folk had them cornered.

Been through worse, he told himself, though at the moment he was hard-pressed to recall just when that was. Though the darkness concealed him from the freaks, it also prevented him from finding a specific target onto which he could focus his powers. My zappers work way better as a rifle than a shotgun, he thought, and those bastards out there know it.

He clenched a fist in frustration, and it began glowing a dull red. They want me to fire blind. They want to tire me out.

Another bullet tore through the drywall nearby, only narrowly missing his glowing fist. He shoved his hand into a vest pocket as he pulled Ava along with him. They had to keep moving.

"If anybody's a 'walking bull's-eye' around here, Rath, it's you," Ava said, looking at his hand, whose glow was still slightly visible, even through the leather vest.

"Shut up," Rath said, though he knew she was right. He continued hustling her along, hoping they'd come upon a door or a window soon. "You seen Lonnie? "

Ava laughed bitterly. "Let's hope she's not cutting a deal of her own right now with those nice people shooting at us. It's happened before, you know. "

A familiar voice cut through the intermittent staccato of gunfire. "All right! Hold your fire! I'm gonna give you what you want! "

Rath recognized the voice immediately, despite the creepy echo that the huge, darkened warehouse imparted to it.

Lonnie.

"I knew it," Ava whispered. "She's gonna sell us out to the freaks. "

"Shut it," Rath said. "Lonnie has a plan. "

"Come on out where we can see you, Vilandra," came the response, a harsh, gravel-coated voice, speaking in perfectly inflected High Antarian. "You can't hope to stand against us all. "

Rath saw shadowy forms moving ahead of him. He wondered if dawn was already breaking, or maybe his eyes were simply adapting to the darkness. With no way to tell the exact time, he hoped for the latter.

Then another shape began to move. It was bathed in a faint glow that the freaks surely had to be able to see.

Lonnie.

At that moment, Lonnie spoke inside his mind, using the lover's bond they shared as a communication channel. Rath, can you hear me? Rath scowled. Her mental voice was faint, as though something were interfering with her thoughtcast. What's wrong, Lonnie? I haven't heard anything blow up yet, and our "friends" are still here and hostile.

They've protected their machines from our powers somehow, Lonnie thought to him.

Rath felt despair engulf him, threatening to drown him like that time the riptide had nearly killed him off the Jersey Shore. Great, Lonnie. If we can't blow up their machine, we can't send these guys back to whatever planet they came from. And they're gonna kill us.

No, Lonnie thought back at him. He felt an almost playful undercurrent in her psionic "voice." I found a boiler room in the basement. They've got an oil furnace down there. These guys didn't bother to protect that. It might take a few minutes, but it's gonna go boom really soon.

Rath grinned, imagining valves being turned and flash-welded temperatures cranking up and up, fuel tanks igniting. That's my girl, he thought. Mass destruction and fireworks, the old-fashioned way.

Buy us some time, Rath. I can't see them with my eyes yet, but I can feel 'em moving toward me.

Lonnie came to a stop a short distance away, her body still glowing with focused, barely contained power. Rath could hear weapons cocking in the darkness, instruments sounding metallic notes that echoed back and forth across the cavernous space.

"I can give you Rath and Ava," Lonnie said aloud, her voice projecting far and wide. "But not if you shoot me. "

"I knew it," Ava muttered. Crouched beside Rath behind one of the shelving racks, she started to rise.

Rath restrained her with a hand to the shoulder. "No. We wait. "

Ava tensed, forming a psionic connection of her own with Rath, just as she had done with them all so many years before, after the Royal Four had first emerged from the gestation pods. All at once, Rath could see into Ava's mind, as well as the images Lonnie was sending him.

Rath felt as if he were suddenly floating invisibly near the

warehouse's high ceiling, and from this vantage he could mentally "see" each of the armed men and women... all of them apparently malnourished drug addicts or other assorted street people... who had surrounded them.

Touch Ava, Lonnie said inside Rath's mind. Let her see what I'm showing you.

Already done, sweetcheeks, Rath answered silently, grinning in the darkness. There were exactly fourteen of the freaks, and as of this moment he knew exactly where they were standing. He knew that Ava did as well.

To Ava, he thought, How many freakazoid brains can you jry at once? Answering inside his mind, Ava seemed ashamed of her earlier distrust of Lonnie. I guess we're about to find out, General. Through the hand he'd placed on Ava's shoulder, Rath felt her body tense as the alien power gathered and built within her.

"So do I have a cease-fire, or what?" Lonnie said, speaking to the darkness, where the armed street people stood in tense silence.

The rough-voiced man who had called out to her earlier answered: "Your 'queen' is trying to pierce our mental defenses. Given that, it seems a truce would be a spectacularly bad idea. "

Oh, crap, Ava thought to Rath. Their machines aren't the only things they've built shields around.

Thanks to Lonnie, Rath could "see" the man in the dark as he strode forward and raised his weapon in Lonnie's direction. Rath released his grip on Ava's shoulder and felt the three-way thoughtlink collapse. Now the universe contained only himself, Lonnie, and the freak who was trying to kill her.

Swept along on a wave of fear and rage, Rath lifted his hands. The power surged and churned within him for a split second before he released it.

The gravel-voiced man with the gun blew apart into countless pieces.

"Move!" Rath shouted at Ava, already on the run. He could hear a fusillade of gunfire as it tore up the space where he had been moments before.

Rath looked toward Lonnie, who still stood in the center of it all, glowing in fury, her arms extended like those of an angry goddess. By some miracle, none of the freaks had managed to shoot her. Then he saw how her image wavered and rippled, like a mirage they'd seen a couple years back after they'd stolen that yuppie's car and headed out to Roswell.

Shields up, he thought, suddenly realizing that his lover could do a pretty convincing impression of her dead brother's powers.

The first rays of the sun were slicing through the skylights, and

Rath saw Ava dive for cover as a pair of armed thugs... strung-out junkies, from the look of them, all bone and gristle... chased her. He raised his hands and released twin flashes of energy, pushing the two men swiftly backward and impaling them both on a nearby metal rack.

Ava looked horrified. "We don't have to kill them, Rath. They're possessed. They're not responsible. "

But Rath knew he didn't have time to make distinctions between the hostile aliens and their innocent hosts. These bodies were carrying lethal weapons, aimed at him and the girls.

"Let the old gods of Antar sort 'em out," Rath said as a red haze swept across his vision while he and Lonnie went to work in earnest.

Rath wasn't certain how long the battle lasted; time seemed simultaneously to speed up and slow down during the fighting. He realized it hadn't gone quickly when he noticed the bright daylight streaming in through the broken windows. He looked straight up and saw the bright cerulean blue that lay beyond the shattered skylights.

He surveyed the now well-illuminated room, which was strewn with upended shelves, wrecked masonry, and lifeless bodies. He saw Ava, standing in goggle-eyed silence. Only then did he realize that his powers felt spent and that he was holding a blood-spattered metal bar. An equally gruesome body lay at his feet.

In an oddly debris-free spot near the center of the warehouse, Lonnie sat on the floor, looking as dazed and exhausted as he felt. Rath suddenly realized that he was looking at what could only be described as ground zero of the battle they had just fought. She's not used to going up against a whole homeless infantry battalion, he thought, running toward Lonnie. None of us is.

"Looks like they're all dead or fled," Rath said gently as he helped her to her feet. He realized that Ava was now beside him as well, concern etched across her pretty but careworn face. "Come on," he said to them both. "We've gotta get out of here, before even more of 'em show up. We're all way too wiped to deal if that happens. "

Lonnie nodded, then stumbled. Rath and Ava both caught her. Finally regaining her footing, Lonnie turned and looked straight at Rath. As always, her eyes were deep and beautiful.

And very frightened, he realized. "It's too late," she said. "I can feel more of them coming in the back way. They're almost on top of us already. "

Rath, hearing angry shouting behind him, turned toward the sound. At least another dozen street people, several of them drawing guns, were heading toward them at a flat-out run.

"Bitchin'," Rath said, already pushing Lonnie toward cover as Ava followed. "Let's go. "

He glanced toward Ava, who had placed a hand against her temple and closed her eyes. "Tell them to take a number. We've got more company." "Who?" Rath asked.

At that moment, a large windowpane over their heads shattered as two metal canisters arced into the warehouse on trails of thick, black smoke that swiftly began filling the room.

"New York's finest," said Ava.

Great. Just great, Rath thought as his chest tightened; and a painful coughing fit seized him.

4 Cheyenne, Wyoming

In simpler times, Kyle Valenti had the high school hero mantle practically bestowed upon him. He had excelled in football and other sports, and had a smart and pretty girlfriend in Liz Parker. If he ever got into typical teenage trouble, the worst he could expect from his father, the town sheriff, was to be grounded.

And then Max Evans had made a connection with Liz one day at the Crashdown, and Kyle's world began to crumble around him. Soon, not only was Liz infatuated with Max, but so, in a manner of speaking, was Kyle's father. Sheriff Valenti suspected something of Max and his friends, but he didn't really articulate his suspicions to his son. In fact, his bond with his son grew more and more strained with each passing day.

Kyle grew to resent Max Evans, so it was quite a surprise that Max ended up saving Kyle's life. Agent Pierce, a thug for some secret government agency, had exchanged gunfire with Sheriff Valenti at the UFO Museum. During the brief gun battle, Kyle was accidentally hit by a bullet fired by his own father.

Even now, Kyle would sometimes wake up at night feeling the bullet tear into his flesh, penetrating skin and bone and muscle. His mouth filled with a pungent metallic taste, Kyle remembered the darkness in the museum creeping inexorably toward him. But Max's approach banished the encroaching darkness. He had laid his glowing, silver-palmed hand on Kyle's wound, healing him instantly.

Since that time, Kyle had joined Liz and Maria among the ranks of the "I Know an Alien" club, and subsequently had been caught up in many of the misadventures and tribulations the half-extraterrestrial teens faced. Interestingly enough, the shared knowledge of the aliens among them had brought Kyle and his father closer together. Kyle sometimes thought it was actually his momentary brush with

mortality that had done the trick, but he knew better; his dad had been obsessed with aliens and UFOs for as long as Kyle could remember. It was an obsession he had inherited from his father. Now, they were among the few people alive who knew the real truth of the matter.

After his resurrection at the hands of Max, Kyle had found Buddhism, and had learned... mostly... to find a more centered space in the universe. He had found that the Buddha's "Four Noble Truths" were tremendously apt for him, as well as for his alien friends: life means suffering; suffering has a cause; the cause of our suffering can be ended; and suffering can be ended by following a path to wisdom, peace, meditation, and growth.

But it was hard for Kyle to stay centered when the cause of the suffering in the last few months had been fear of capture by the government. Indeed, at times it had seemed as though the best path to end the cause of his suffering was to fight back. But the Noble Eightfold Path pushed him toward peace, and taught him not to bring harm to others. On the other hand, the tenets of the Path also talked about not lying or stealing, and he and the others had done their share of both lately, in the interests of survival.

Since leaving Roswell, he had again been healed by Max, and Kyle now wondered if these healings weren't bringing about some form of transformation within him. During his late-night meditations, when the others were usually asleep, another thought kept creeping unbidden into the Zen garden he strove to make of his mind. Haw I been made into something other than what I was before all of this started? Am I now part alien, like Liz? And if that's what's happened, then what will my purpose be? Today, Kyle had little time for such internal debates. He stood in the Cybernet Cafe in an open-air mall in Cheyenne, Wyoming, teetering on the brink of mote potential suffering and confrontation. Coming toward him and his friends from the front of the cafe were government agents and police. More cops and government spooks were also likely closing in from other directions... including, no doubt, the section of the mall toward which Max and Michael had just headed moments ago.

Kyle whirled and looked toward the back of the room. He saw a pay phone and a rest room sign, but no door. There's got to be an exit back there, he reassured himself.

He turned to Maria, who stood saucer-eyed as the cops and feds continued their approach. Liz was looking toward the back of the shop. "Find the back door," Kyle said, surprised at how firm his voice sounded. "I'm guessing from the layout of this place that it leads to a service corridor. "

"Already on it," Liz said. "Let's go." Kyle shook his head. "You

three go. I'm heading out the front to try to warn Max and Michael. "

Liz opened her mouth to argue, but Maria yanked her by the arm and pulled her to the back of the cafe.

As Kyle opened the glass door to exit out the front, he saw Isabel touching the adjacent windows and doors. Immediately they changed color, an inky black spreading like a viscous liquid across the clear panes. Camouflage, Kyle thought. Smart thinking. Sure, it would likely draw attention, but so would the onrushing peace officers.

He knew Isabel probably would have fused the door locks before exiting through the same back way that Liz and Maria were taking. He also knew he didn't have long to think about it; their pursuers were already less than twenty yards away, and closing fast.

Spotting his opportunity, Kyle moved across the balcony aisle and grappled with a giant garbage can there. It was one of the round, concrete types, with a metal container nestled inside it. There was no way he could pick it up. But he could tip it over and roll it. As he strained to topple the trash bin, he saw that the police had closed their distance by half. He concentrated so thoroughly on his task that they seemed to be moving in slow motion. He could hear them yelling to him, but he blocked them out as he might have done with any small distraction during his meditations; they might as well have been speaking a foreign language.

With a final shove, he sent the garbage rolling straight at the cops. Before it could even reach them, he sprinted toward the food court. He caught sight of Max and Michael across the courtyard, and saw that they finally seemed to have noticed what was going on. As they raced away from the tacqueria and toward the cafe, Kyle saw still more pursuers coming up one of the escalators, and pointed toward them to alert Max and Michael.

But it may already have been too late. Two agents and a cop had their guns drawn, and they pointed them straight at the young pair, yelling for them to get down on the ground. Max and Michael put their hands forward, palms out, fingers flexed, and Kyle saw a familiar glow of energy. Kyle knew that for them to use their powers this publicly, they had to be as panicked as he was.

A wave of power thrust forward from within both of them, blasting their attackers over the side railing and onto the mall's lower level. Flailing, two of their pursuers landed in a decorative fountain. The remaining one wasn't so lucky, instead hitting a plastic "bench, which shattered on impact.

Kyle ran toward Max and Michael. "Where's Liz?" Max asked, his eyes wild.

"I'm pretty sure they all got out into the service corridor through the back of the cafe," Kyle said, keeping his voice low.

Michael used his powers to blow another pair of government men off their feet, sending them crashing back onto the escalator. "They better have gotten out. You should have stayed with them. "

"Somebody had to get out here and warn you," Kyle said.

Amidst the screaming from terrified mall patrons, an amplified voice echoed from the halls. "Drop your weapons and put your hands up!" Kyle saw agents trying to get the door to the Cybernet Cafe open, but they were cautious; because of the blackened glass, they had no way of knowing what might await them inside.

Max grinned, looking almost malicious. "What'll it be... hands up or weapons down?" he asked. "Can't do both. "

Kyle grinned at Max, whose hands were his weapons. Pointing toward a nearby trendy clothing store, Max said, "In there." The front of the establishment was all windows, with fancily dressed mannequins aplenty set in various poses.

The three fugitives ducked into the store, even as clerks and customers dove for cover, some whimpering in fear. "Everybody keep your heads down," Max yelled. "We won't hurt you, but the guys chasing us just might! "

Hiding behind a rack of overpriced sweatshirts, Kyle saw that the police and government agents now stood just outside the clothing store. All the bystanders were out of sight. Though the cops seemed to be debating strategy, Kyle was willing to bet that they couldn't be prepared for what was coming next.

Standing behind the clothing rack near Kyle, Max and Michael put their shoulders together, extended their arms and hands, and unleashed a powerful wave of force. The glass windows at the front of the store exploded, and mannequins, sweaters, pants, and platform boots went flying outward.

Kyle breathed a quiet sigh of relief that the explosive wave only hit their pursuers; none of the customers in the store appeared to have been hurt.

"Let's go," Max said, turning. Kyle could see that sweat had beaded on his friend's forehead. Kyle followed him and Michael toward the employee stockroom in the back of the store, praying it would lead to the same service corridor where Liz, Maria, and Isabel were supposed to have headed.

"Which way?" Maria asked, her voice a plaintive wail.

Liz looked down the hall in both directions, then came to a decision. "That way," she said, pointing to their left. "There's an exit sign. "

Liz was relieved to see Isabel finally come scooting out of the doorway right behind her and Maria.

"Did Kyle make it to Max and Michael?" Liz asked Isabel, feeling a

tight knot of fear slowly expanding in her belly.

"I don't know," Isabel said. "By the time I was through making my barricade, I couldn't see out any better than the bad guys could see in."
“

"We've got to get to the van either way," Maria said, pulling Liz's arm. "If it isn't already surrounded by MiBs. “

The three girls had run about fifty feet down the corridor, their footfalls echoing like gunshots, when a pair of side doors opened almost immediately in front of them. Two burly agents in dark suits entered the corridor and rushed them. Liz heard a sharp crackle of electricity as the trio collided with the agents, then saw Maria and Isabel falling to the floor like marionettes with their strings cut.

Liz jumped over the body of Maria as it fell, staying just out of the reach of the agent who carried the taser. As the other man knelt to check on the two fallen girls, the taser-toting agent continued to advance on Liz.

"Get down on the ground!" he yelled, pulling his gun with his free hand for emphasis.

Liz's mind whirled. She could run, but he might shoot her. And if he does, what if Max doesn't manage to save me this time? For all she knew, all the others might have already been captured... or worse.

"Get down on the ground!" he yelled again, his gun now leveled directly at her.

Slowly, as if in a dream-state, Liz Parker began to kneel on the cold, unyielding concrete floor.

Isabel moved languidly on the silken sheets, extracting her limbs and stretching. No, not Isabel. Vilandra. Her long, tapered gray fingers were exquisitely formed, fit for royalty, fit for worship.

A pleasant-smelling wind blew in from over the black vastness of the sea, and the room was faintly illuminated by the glow of teke orbs, as well as from the trio of moons that were set like jewels into the dark, cloud-strewn sky. Vilandra tilted her head back and viewed them through the rain-sprinkled skylight. The wet, colored glass fractured the moons' perfect spherical shapes, but somehow augmented their natural beauty.

She heard a sound from the antechamber, then saw a figure illuminated from behind. It was N'Kolus, and he had replaced some of his garments, apparently while she'd dozed.

"You should get some rest," she said to him, low and seductive. "You don't want to be too tired for tomorrow. “

He sat on the bed next to her and caressed her hand with his own. She could see her beautiful reflection in his large, dark eyes. "You have already tired me," he said. "But tomorrow will bring with it a new dawn. “

He leaned over to kiss her, and Vilandra lost herself in the passionate moment with the handsome soldier.

She heard another sound, and she broke their embrace with a start. Another figure was standing in the entrance, holding a chalice before him. "I see I'm interrupting," the person said, and Vilandra recognized the voice as Kivar's.

Vilandra looked toward N'Kolus, who seemed to take Kivar's surprise entrance in stride. "Kivar, I didn't expect you so soon," she said.

"My other engagements this evening are finished," he said, doffing a wet cloak and letting it slip to the ground. "Everything went according to my plans. "

He sat on the edge of the bed and offered her the chalice. "Don't be alarmed, my beautiful Vilandra. I knew of your affair with N'Kolus, and gave him my blessing to continue. Anything to make you happy. "

Vilandra drank deeply from the cup, and smiled at her two lovers. "What will make me happy is for peace to come tomorrow. The truce you promised will lead toward that goal. "

"Yes," Kivar said. "And thank you for allowing us to enter the city unopposed, my exquisite Vilandra. "

"My brother won't approve, but he acts too slowly sometimes," Vilandra said. She was about to say something else, but she found her thoughts were becoming unclear.

"Your brother is past caring what you do, lovely one," Kivar said, caressing her cheek with his hand. "As is Rath. "

Vilandra was about to ask Kivar what he meant, but she wasn't able to speak. She felt weighed down, and as she looked at the two men who had been her lovers, she saw them as if from a distance. Above them, the colors of the skylight became more and more diffuse, and even the ever-constant moons of Antar seemed to dim.

And then, the hues of skylight faded to darkness, and Vilandra was no more.

An eternity of darkness seemed to pass before another voice impinged on her mind. "Isabel? "

With a great effort, Isabel lifted her head. Crouched next to her was Alex Whitman, looking just as he always had: comfortable.

"Isabel, you need to wake up," Alex said. "Lemme sleep," Isabel said, her words thick and slurred. "I'm tired of running. "

"I know, but you have to keep running," Alex said. "Things are going to get worse, and you must try to help." He didn't touch her, but rather hovered nearby, his words soft and gentle in her ear. Alex had always been so pleasant and plain and safe. How can he be talking about danger? Isabel struggled to marshal her energies enough to sit up, but discovered that her limbs were twitching spasmodically, as if

she were being electrocuted.

"They need you, Isabel," he said, his face showing concern.

"Who does?" she asked groggily.

"All of them," Alex responded. "Your friends. Your family. Your husband. "

"That was pretty wild," Kyle said as he followed Max and Michael out into the service corridor. It was clear to Kyle that Max was beside himself with worry, and hoped his own Zen-like calm would rub off on him.

Michael, however, seemed way past the reach of any Buddhist vision of tranquillity; he was obviously ready to go to war.

Quickly scanning the corridor, Kyle saw that it was empty in both directions, except for some flattened cardboard boxes lying along one of the walls, next to a few-scattered bags of trash and packing foam. He pointed down to their left, where the corridor angled around a corner. "That's the direction the girls would have come from. "

"We've got to see if they made it," Michael said, already dashing for the corner. Kyle wondered if Max felt relieved when his friend took the lead at times like this. He was certainly glad that he wasn't the one who had to make all the decisions for the group.

Max and Kyle followed immediately behind Michael, both sparing brief glances over their shoulders to look for pursuers. A moment later the trio rounded the corner.

They saw the girls, along with a pair of federal agents. Isabel and Maria lay unmoving on the concrete floor; while one agent was putting handcuffs on Liz from behind, another agent kept a powerful-looking gun trained on her.

Kyle turned toward Max and Michael and saw that they were both extending their hands forward, obviously about to unleash their powers.

Suddenly the agent who held his gun on Liz turned and shouted to them. "These girls are alive for now, but if you make any threatening gestures, I can't guarantee they'll stay that way. "

"What do we do?" Kyle asked, putting his hand on Max's shoulder.

Suddenly everything changed.

Kyle was seeing the corridor from a different angle, and as he turned his head, he saw himself looking back... at himself. "Max, what do we do?" other-Kyle asked, even as the very same words were leaving his own lips... Then he was in the clothing store, watching himself sweep fragments of shattered glass from his fuzzy purple sweater top; he noticed that one of his long, lacquered nails had broken during the explosion... Next he was looking down at Liz's hands as he knelt over her and fastened the handcuffs around her wrists... A heartbeat later he was looking down his arm at the gun in

his hand as he pointed it at the frightened trio of teenage boys, one of whom was him, Kyle Valenti... And then he found himself in utter darkness. He crawled forward along an unyielding surface toward a dazzling light that made him squint. The brilliance quickly resolved itself into Isabel, who lay on the service corridor's hard floor; she looked beautiful as always, yet disturbingly lifeless.

A nearby movement caught his eye, and he turned to see a shape emerge from the surrounding darkness. It was Alex Whitman. Who had been dead now for nearly two years.

"Alex?" Kyle asked, incredulous.

Alex tilted his head and looked at him strangely, almost as though he were having trouble recognizing him. "Your voice sounds like Max's, Kyle. "

"What's going on?" Kyle needed to know.

"You need to help Isabel. Her nervous system has been disrupted," Alex explained, crouching beside the young half-alien woman.

"I can't help her," Kyle said. He knelt next to her and pulled her head up in his hands, then cradled her neck in one hand and pulled open an eyelid with the other.

"Isabel, wake up!" She didn't respond. Her eyes were rolled back into their sockets, showing nothing but white.

Almost instinctively, he spread his fingers, positioning one on her cheek, the others splaying out from her forehead to her ear, his thumb coming to rest near her jaw.

Then Kyle's hand began to glow, faintly at first, but quickly brightening and taking on a silver-blue tint. His mind was filling up with a kaleidoscopic tumble of images: a star pattern; a spaceship; a trio of moons in fragmented multiple colors; the rock formations of the desert beyond Roswell; a series of runelike characters glowing on a glass surface; the fathomless black eyes of a gray-skinned creature leaning over him. Moments later, the visions faded away, and the glow that had engulfed his hand subsided. Kyle felt exhausted.

"This might take time you don't have," Alex said. "But you can end the suffering. You are the key. "

"What's happening to me, Alex? "

Kyle had barely phrased the question before he found himself back in the hallway, standing behind Michael, his hand on Max's shoulder.

"Alex? What?" Michael asked, looking at Kyle strangely.

"We've got to get the girls out of there," Max said, obviously focused on the girls and the agents who had apprehended them. "But it's too far to use our powers effectively, and we'll risk them getting hurt. "

"You three, down on the ground!" the gun-toting agent yelled.

Knowing more than a little about law enforcement from his father, Kyle imagined that the man was surprised they hadn't left the girls behind and made a break for it. Most criminals ran, or tried to.

"Do what he says," Max said, his voice pitched low, clearly intended only for Kyle's and Michael's ears. "But be prepared to fight back. "

Michael grimaced as he put his arms in the air and began to kneel. Whether it was his background as a soldier on Antar or the stubborn tough-guy personality drilled into him by his abusive stepfather in a trailer park back in Roswell, Kyle knew that Michael clearly was not happy about backing down from a fight. "We can take them, Max. Our shields can stop the bullets. "

Max was kneeling as well. "We can stop the bullets from hitting us. But we can't shield Isabel or Liz or Maria. Isabel might be able to shield them, but they've done something to her. "

"They disrupted her system," Kyle explained. "They've got tasers. "

Behind them, they heard a commotion in the hall. Kyle realized that the other agents and officers had made their way into the back of the corridor. Though it seemed an eternity had passed since he and the others had come to this spot, Kyle knew that, in reality, it had probably only been a minute or two.

Kyle's mind raced. What do we do? If we can wake Isabel up, she might be able to protect the other girls, or at least give Liz a chance to use her defensive powers.

The scuffle of shoes and boots behind them grew louder, and Max and Kyle turned their heads to see seven armed men coming toward them. Kyle glanced at Michael, who kept his gaze squarely on the agents who menaced the girls.

Kyle closed his eyes and tried to go back to the place where he had just come from, where he had seen the unconscious Isabel and had spoken with Alex. He had no idea how he'd gotten himself there in the first place. But he knew that if he could return there, he could change the terrible future that now barreled toward them all like an out-of-control freight train.

Concentrating hard, Kyle saw Isabel again, lying in the darkness, very far away. As he moved closer, he began shouting to her, his words echoing up and down some back service corridor of his own mind. "Isabel! Isabel, wake up! "

"split up!" Rath shouted, coughing. "We'll meet up again tonight, in the usual place. "

Unfortunately he had already lost track of Lonnie and Ava in all the tumult, and could only hope that they'd heard him. A bedlam of shouts, curses, and weapons fire now filled the gutted warehouse, as did the smoke from the canisters that had fallen at Rath's feet. Enclosed behind an impenetrable veil of caustic vapor, Rath found that he could still move, but it felt as though he were swimming through peanut butter. Unable to draw breath, or see much of anything through his burning eyes, he forced his body forward, away from the din.

All at once, a wave of dizziness seized him, and he dropped heavily to his knees. Then he noticed that some clear air lingered near the floor. Inhaling deeply, he crawled as quickly as he could toward one of the walls.

He could breathe now, but his eyes continued to water obscuring his vision. But now he saw light ahead of him. The fire escape has to be around here, he thought, rising in a corner to feel around for a railing he remembered having seen earlier. Focusing past the exhaustion caused by the earlier battle, Rath concentrated on neutralizing the effects of the smoke canisters. Moments later, he felt only marginally better. He was still tired, and he simply wasn't the healer the late Zan the Man had been.

But at least he could see a little more clearly now. Rath saw that he stood only a few yards away from a wide, cracked window, through which he could see the platform and railings of a rusty metal fire escape. Its ladder led downward toward the street.

Machine-gun fire perforated the floor near his feet. He bolted toward the fire escape, diving straight for the window. Shutting his eyes tightly and throwing his arms in front of his face, he let his careening body shatter the glass. His heavy leathers protected his forearms, but his cheeks and scalp felt moist from a thousand tiny cuts. He ignored the pain and hurried down the fire escape ladder, which quickly extended toward the pavement in response to his weight.

He paused, glancing groundward for the first time since he'd gotten clear of the building. A little less than one story below him, ten or fifteen riot cops, decked out in body armor and gas masks, were rushing into the building through one of the street-level loading docks, which the cops apparently had just knocked down with the front end of their armored vehicle. More riot cops seemed to be coming, both from the armored car and also from around the building's corner, while he watched.

One of the troopers suddenly looked up in Rath's direction,

though Rath couldn't see the cop's eyes through his shiny black helmet visor. The policeman pointed at him with a nasty-looking black truncheon and barked an unintelligible command.

More cops paused momentarily, and each of them looked Rath's way. Several leveled their rifles in his direction. Caught between the hammer and the anvil, Rath thought, quickly moving his muscular body back up the ladder and onto the fire escape platform. Alien-possessed derelicts were one thing. Highly trained armored cops were something else entirely. Even if Lonnie and Ava manage to dodge the freaks in there, he thought, they aren't gonna have an easy time getting past these guys.

As Rath headed back toward the shattered window, one of the riot cops down below bellowed an order to halt. Rath ignored the command, as well as the bullet that struck the masonry near his shoulder. He dived back into the building, wondering exactly how long he had left until the oil furnace that Lonnie had sabotaged finally exploded.

Moments later, the warehouse reverberated with a deafening roar as gouts of smoke and flame erupted everywhere all at once. Rath couldn't help thinking that he, Lonnie, and Ava probably had very little chance of getting out of this alive.

"Boom!" Lonnie said, grinning at Ava through the lingering pall of tear gas. The two of them were still lying on the floor, where they had thrown themselves after the cops had entered and started exchanging fire with the armed alien freaks.

"I hope that explosion took out the freakazoids' machinery," Ava said, coughing. "I was starting to think that boiler you sabotaged was gonna take all day to blow. "

Lonnie nodded as she rose unsteadily to her feet. Ava thought she looked as utterly exhausted as she herself felt. "You worry too much, O Queen of Antar," Lonnie said, pointing toward a heap of dusty clothing that only moments before had contained a hostile, alien-possessed derelict. "I just gave 'em their one-way ticket home. Without their machinery, they can't hang on to their host bodies. They just crumble away to dust like the Skins in their husks, or those vamps on Buffy. "

Ava looked at the mortal remains of what had been a human being, and suddenly felt ill. She realized the tear gas was only partly responsible. "Too bad we couldn't have found a better way. "

"Better them than us," Lonnie said, shrugging. "Now let's get out of here. "

Ava coughed like a four-pack-a-day smoker as Lonnie helped her to her feet.

"Great," Ava said as she recovered from her coughing fit. "Now all

we have to do is slip past the cops and find Ra... “

"Freeze! Police!" Fatigued, Ava hadn't noticed the riot cop until it was far too late.

Should have stayed in freaking Roswell with Max, Ava thought, meekly raising her hands.

Sergeant Vince Orman had only been forced to draw his weapon in the line of duty on a few prior occasions. Today was the first time he'd been forced to take another human being's life. The unkempt young man who had leaped out at him from behind a storage locker had been young... little more than a boy, really. Despite his riot helmet and gas mask, Orman had seen the gun in his assailant's hand and had ordered him to drop it.

But the kid had simply kept on coming, a vacant, strung-out look on his face. Now, he lay dead on the warehouse floor as clouds of tear gas quickly engulfed the place. Feeling a bitter upwelling of regret, Orman looked carefully at the teen's face. He thought of the kid who had tried to exit the building via the fire escape a few minutes earlier, only to be chased back inside by the squad. Though Orman had only caught a glimpse of that kid, he could tell that this wasn't him. Better keep an eye out for that one. I've seen him around on the street, and he looks like trouble.

Luckily the tear gas canisters seemed to be having a profound effect on the other perps. Like the dead teen, these people carried firearms of various calibers, and represented a fair cross-section of New York 's street dwellers. They were dropping like flies, even as Orman and the men and women of his SWAT team secured the building's perimeter and began methodically handcuffing the at least two dozen people who were now gasping for air on the warehouse floor.

Orman felt the building shudder as a sound like thunder rattled the floor beneath his boots. "What the hell was that?" he said, turning toward a female officer named Carmody "Sounds like somebody set off a bomb," Carmody said. "Down in the basement. “

"Go check it out," Orman said, suppressing a nightmare memory of Ground Zero, and all the friends and colleagues he'd lost there. "Let's hope we don't have more terrorists on our hands. “

"I don't think it's terrorists, Sarge," Carmody said, pointing toward one of the cuffed thugs who lay on the floor near her feet. Though Orman couldn't see Carmody's face, he could hear an edge of incredulity in her voice.

Orman studied the perp on the ground and saw that he was decaying into dust right before his eyes. Looking through the haze of gas that still hung in the air, the sergeant saw that the other perps were also rapidly turning to powdery ash, which scattered into the air

to mix with the drifting tear gas. All that remained of them was their clothing, weapons, and the handcuffs that had been placed on them during their arrests.

"I don't think it's terrorists," Carmody repeated, kicking at the now-vacant pile of ragged clothing at her feet. "Unless we just broke up an al-Qaeda sleeper cell from Mars, that is. "

"Sarge!" called another member of the SWAT team, a burly former bouncer named Richards, who was handcuffing a pair of teenage girls. With their bizarre punk hair and motley riot grrl fashions, they looked like refugees from some eighties-era retro dance club.

Orman walked quickly toward Richards and the girls. "Bring 'em both in for questioning, Artie. I think these ladies have a bit of explaining to do. "

Hidden behind a discarded pile of scrap metal, Rath j watched as a phalanx of heavily armed riot cops proceeded to cuff the fallen aliens, who proceeded to turn to dust just moments after Lonnie's carefully arranged boiler-room explosion.

Rath smiled. The Antarian-possessed freakazoids wouldn't be bothering them, at least for a little while. That was one problem down.

Then he saw the cops leading Lonnie and Ava away in handcuffs. Both girls were clearly too exhausted to put up any real resistance. And Rath knew he couldn't muster enough power to fight off so many armed cops. Not after having been worn down by the freaks.

Maybe there's another way, he thought, silently emerging from the shadows. Moving stealthily, he mustered the last dregs of his powers.

Rath approached one of the riot cops from behind.

6 Cheyenne, Wyoming

Max heard Kyle's words reverberating as loudly as a thunderclap. "Isabel! Isabel, wake up! "

He let out a groan as he turned his head, taking in everything in the space of a heartbeat. Everyone in the hallway who wasn't handcuffed or unconscious was clapping hands to ears, grimacing in pain.

All except Kyle, Max noted. Kyle knelt beside him, his mouth tightly closed, though his eyes were wide with surprise at everyone else's reaction to his words.

Max realized only then that Kyle had not spoken the words aloud.

Everyone had heard Kyle, but he had not actually uttered Isabel's name aloud.

Their equilibrium disrupted by the sudden imbalance in their inner ears, the agents and police wobbled a bit. But Max could see that they weren't quite incapacitated.

Gazing down the corridor, Max saw Isabel move slightly, then saw her turn her head. She's okay, he thought, his spirits buoyed.

Isabel rolled over and lifted her hand. Though she still appeared weak, she managed to send a power blast into the midsection of the agent nearest to her, tossing him upward and slamming him against the wall. His gun tumbled from his hand as he crumpled to the ground.

Liz, use your powers, Max thought. In that instant, in his mind, he saw Kyle, then Liz. And he knew that she, too, had heard him, thanks to whatever channel had allowed Kyle to speak directly into their minds.

Down the hall, Liz gritted her teeth and kicked out toward the second agent. Her foot collided with his leg. It would have been an ineffectual enough blow under normal circumstances, but Max could see from the glow that suffused her that she had charged herself with electrical energy. It was yet another manifestation of her still-developing powers.

The agent went down as if he himself had been tasered, but Max barely noticed. Moving as one, he and Michael rolled over and extended their hands. "A barrier, not a blast," Max yelled, and in his mind he released energy down from his brain, through his heart, into his arm, and out through his fingers.

A few feet behind... between the teens and the second group of pursuers... the air shimmered with a slight rainbow effect. Max, Michael, and Kyle got to their feet, and as they did so, the agents charged toward them. And just as quickly, the men bounced off the barely visible energy barrier that Max and Michael had just erected.

"Get Maria and Liz out of here," Max yelled, keeping most of his attention focused on the barrier-blocked agents even as he looked toward the girls. As Kyle ran toward the girls, Max and Michael began stepping backward; as they did so, the barrier moved backward with them, keeping the agents at bay.

Max saw that Liz and Isabel were both standing now, and watched as Liz turned around so that Isabel stood behind her. Isabel touched the handcuffs that bound Liz's wrists, and they clicked open and clattered to the floor. Kyle squatted and picked up Maria; she groaned in his arms, but didn't regain consciousness.

"Come on," Kyle said to Liz, looking off down the hallway toward an exit sign and the stairwell located just beneath it.

"But Max... "

"The Pod Squad is going to have to defend themselves, Liz. They're up for it," Kyle said.

Max turned slightly as he backed up, and was glad to see that Liz and Kyle were leaving. He called back to Isabel. "Get their weapons and IDs. "

Moments later, he and Michael were stepping over the two unconscious agents who had nearly captured the girls. Their other pursuers were still hammering forward, trying to batter the force field down with nothing more than brute strength.

"Isabel, we're going to need one major burst of power here," Max said. "They're just going to follow us out to the exit otherwise. "

She steeled her gaze at him, and he saw there was a bit of blood on her forehead and coming from her nose. "Where do we aim it? "

Max judged that they were now maybe ten feet past the fallen agents, and perhaps another fifty from the exit that Kyle, Liz, and Maria were taking.

Max crouched. "At the floor," he said. Max and Isabel placed their hands on the floor between them and the agents, focusing their powers just underneath the force field that Michael was now maintaining single-handedly.

With a groan that sounded not unlike a Hollywood sound effect, the floor imploded downward, cracking the plaster-and-cinder-block walls that bounded the corridor, and sending a huge cloud of gray dust everywhere that wasn't blocked by Michael's force field. The agents on the other side of the now-collapsed floor cursed, pinwheeling their arms to avoid falling onto the lower level. Max smiled grimly when he saw that their gyrations couldn't prevent most of them from tumbling away into the dust cloud. He knew they'd be hurt by the fall, but they would survive.

"Nice one!" Michael exclaimed, as he allowed the force field to collapse, then turned to follow Max and Isabel. The three of them ran together toward the exit door, and Max was pleased to see that the stairway opened onto the mall's parking garage. Even more luckily, they were on the same level where they'd parked the van.

"Which way to the van?" Michael asked. Kyle and Liz were already out of sight.

"That way," Isabel said, pointing. "I remember passing that blue Jaguar on our way in. "

As they ran, they heard a revving engine and the echoing squeal of tires. The VW Microbus they had gotten from Jesse back in Roswell turned the corner moments later, with Kyle behind the wheel.

With a screech of the brakes, the van stopped near them. Michael flung open the side door and jumped in, followed by Isabel. Max took

one last look toward the exit before he hopped into the van, and was dismayed to see that at least one agent had apparently jumped the gap in the demolished floor. One agent with a cell phone.

This wasn't over yet.

Roswell, New Mexico Roswell Sheriff's Deputy Jim Valenti was eating a pastrami sandwich at his desk, taking a late lunch. Sheriff Hanson regularly rotated his deputies, and today was Valenti's day to work in the office. As was typical, not much was happening. Dina Heikenberry had called in a few minutes ago to run some plates on a speeding car, and Glenn Carver had reported some teens motocrossing on Mesaliko Indian Reservation property.

With a quick glance around the office, Valenti tapped the trackball mouse on his desk, waking up the computer screen. Deftly using a menu, he scrolled down to a folder called "Games." He highlighted the mah-jongg game Shanghai and double-clicked, starting the program. In the "Layout" menu, he chose "Boar," and a black field quickly began to fill with colorful tiles.

Valenti placed his cursor over the lower left corner, where nothing was visible, and clicked. Immediately, a popup window appeared, reporting an error alert of "47" and displaying an empty dialogue box. He typed his password, "oneofus," and it launched a specially built e-mail application that began searching for incoming communications.

Three months ago, he had pulled over Gerry Ailston for weaving on the road. Ailston had consented to a search of his vehicle, and the deputy had found a small bag of marijuana. Not enough for a felony, but certainly a misdemeanor. But it was the laptop in the back of the car that especially had caught Valentis attention, as well as the bumper stickers that were... as he later found out... the obscure sayings of computer geeks.

Ailston had been a friend of Alex Whitmans in high school, and Valenti knew he was more of a maladjusted geek than a drug dealer or threat to the Roswellian way of life. Kyle had even mentioned once or twice what a genius Ailston was with computers.

After appropriately scaring Ailston and bringing out a set of handcuffs, Valenti stared at him closely. "I'll tell you what, Gerry. Seeing as how I don't think you're going to be driving under the influence again anytime soon, I'm going to let this one slide... if you do me a favor. A big favor. "

Ailston shifted nervously, his reddened eyes glancing side to side like a pair of trapped animals. "What kind of a... favor? "

"I need some computer help. Some top-secret help." The kid grinned, seeming to relax. "Ohhh, sure. I just thought... I mean... sure, I'll do any computer work you want. "

True to his word, Ailston had done so. Valenti knew he was being watched by the feds, so any contact he had with the cyber-talented teen was carried out very surreptitiously. Gerry had shown him some extremely neat computer tricks, and had built... to the deputy's exacting specifications... some customized applications for Internet access, text programs, and HTML coding. These applications enabled him to use the computers at work without anyone's knowledge. Valenti had the kid describe each step along the way, and even learned how to modify the programs himself.

Ailston had even... on Valenti's recommendation... been allowed to update the Web page for the Roswell Sheriffs Department. Nobody knew that Valenti's own page on the site was one portal, nor that the "Boar" configuration to Shanghai was another portal. Valenti had others, and only used the incoming portals for a week at a time. He knew the Special Unit... or whatever it was called... was keeping tabs on him, along with the Evans family, the Parkers, and Amy DeLuca. He wasn't certain that the computers at work were bugged, but he tried to be as careful as he could be regardless.

Now, the computer beeped at him and displayed three text e-mail files. He decrypted them, sent them to the printer, then tapped a couple of keys that re-encrypted the text messages. Anyone trying to recover them now without the encryption key would end up crashing the program for good.

As Valenti reached for the three printed pages, he chuckled to himself. I've been worried all this time about whether Kyle and I would develop alien powers the way Liz did after Max healed her. Maybe all this computer expertise is my new power.

He smiled as he looked at the three printouts. Each was an e-mail message... from Kyle, Maria, and Liz. A quick read told him that they were all okay. Good. Their parents will be happy to hear that. Now he would just have to wait until an appropriate time to start the delivery route. Dinner at the Crashdown with an extra-special tip might just be the ticket tonight.

He slipped the papers into a pile of his other paperwork, then grabbed his sandwich for another bite.

Kyle's all right, he thought, grinning again.

Cheyenne, Wyoming Liz watched Kyle spin the wheel, making the van lurch to the side and screech down a curving ramp. She attempted to keep her balance in the back, but she fell against the side wall, the still-unconscious Maria moving with her.

"Ow!" Liz exclaimed as she tried to steady herself. Everyone else who was conscious grabbed hold of whatever they could to stay steady.

"Sorry about that," Kyle yelled back. "But if we don't get out of

here soon, we probably never will. “

"The last agent I just saw had a cell phone," Max said, pulling the back window blind aside so he could look out. "Keep an eye out in case we pick up a tail. “

"Got it," Isabel said, shifting in the front passengers seat.

Michael looked toward Liz and Maria. Liz could see that Michael's attention was torn between his urge to stand and fight and his need to get the girl he loved to safety.

"I think she'll be fine," Liz said, smoothing Maria's hair away from her closed eyes. "Her pulse is strong, and she's groaned a few times. Maybe she'll be coming around soon. “

"Good," Michael said. He looked vulnerable for a moment, a side that most of them rarely ever saw. Then, setting his jaw with grim determination, he moved to the back of the van, where he crouched beside Max.

"Hold on, everybody!" Kyle yelled. Moments later, the van turned sharply again, tires screaming.

"They're blocking the exit!" Isabel said, pointing straight ahead. Liz could only wonder what obstacle fate had dropped into their path this time.

"We've got a car on our tail too," Max said.

"Ever see that Blues Brothers movie?" Kyle asked as the van continued toward the waiting cars. "Maybe I should take a detour through the mall. “

Liz scowled. "Focus, Zen master," she said.

"This is going to be tight," Kyle said, ignoring the reprimand. Grabbing one of the van's walls, Liz moved up onto her knees, just in time to see through the windshield that they were facing certain doom. A pair of police squad cars was parked nose-to-nose in the driveway of the mall lot. But there was an escape route.

Kyle took it. Veering to the side, the van smashed through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows of a store display at the corner of the mall. Mannequins dressed in mall couture were knocked aside like bowling pins. The right-side wheels of the van ran up onto the raised floor, and for a fleeting second, Liz was terrified that the vehicle would flip over.

The moment was brief, and before the glass and mannequins had hit the ground behind them, the van had landed on the sidewalk, then the street. Revving the engine, Kyle began speeding down the street, directly toward an intersection.

Liz saw Kyle's grin reflected at her in the rear-view mirror. "We're on a mission from God," he said, quoting The Blues Brothers. Before Liz could reach forward and slap him on the back of the head, he added, "Four-way light coming up. Which way? “

Liz turned to see Max cursing under his breath. He was still looking through the back window shade. "We've got at least one car tailing us, and they're going to call reinforcements. Take whatever way will get us to hiding. "

"That's helpful," Kyle muttered, then slammed the pedal to the floor. Liz nearly fell over from the acceleration.

The van came to a red light, but Kyle barely slowed before merging into the somewhat dense traffic headed to the right. "Liz heard angry honks and brakes squealing, and realized that no matter how deftly Kyle had moved the van, the lives of innocent bystanders were at risk. Sighing heavily, she closed her eyes. Why won't they just leave us alone? She knew that the answer could be summed up in a single word: "fear." She had felt that fear, as had Maria and Kyle and Alex and Sheriff Valenti. Sure, their friends had grown to understand that the half-aliens who lived among them meant no harm. Most of the time, they didn't even want to be aliens. But in the beginning, she, too, had experienced that very same fear. So how could she blame others now for reacting in the same way? "They're still on us," Max said, looking out the back window. "Eight cars back and gaining." Just then, Liz could hear the rising wail of a siren.

Liz decided to pay more attention to what was ahead than what lay behind. Looking forward, she watched as Isabel scanned through the scratched windshield, then pointed out to Kyle's left.

"Up there," Isabel said. "If you can get in front of that semi, you can use it to block them and make a turn. "

Honking the horn, Kyle accelerated the van. Liz could see that cars were pulling to the side to let them pass, and then she saw the truck Isabel was talking about.

Moments later, Kyle swerved in front of the truck. In the back, Michael jumped as the truck blew its air horn, its brakes squealing. Through the windows, Liz could see its front grille looming behind them, much too close for comfort.

"Hang on," Kyle said again, swerving the van. Liz saw a yellow light flash by as he turned, apparently racing through another intersection. The minibus shuddered, tires scratching rubber across the asphalt, but kept its balance and much of its forward momentum.

Then Liz heard an impact, followed by the unmistakable grinding sound of metal on metal. For a moment she wondered if something had blown up in the van's engine, like the time they'd all been stranded in the little town of Stonewall.

Liz turned to see both Michael and Max glued to the windows. "What happened?" she asked, her voice more shrill than she wanted it to be.

"We just lost our pursuer," Max said. "Literally. They hit an SUV "

"Ouch," Kyle said. "Let that be a lesson to both alien-hunters and gas guzzlers. "

"Anyone else following us?" Isabel asked.

"No, but we still have to get to safety. Find us a place to hide, Kyle," Max said, his voice firm and in control. He wasn't just requesting it; he was commanding it. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Liz knew that at times like these, his leadership instincts simply took over. She didn't mind. It felt right. She turned back toward the front of the van.

"You got it, Max," Kyle said, wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

Liz heard a groan behind her and turned to see Maria groggily waking up. Michael moved swiftly over to her side.

"Wha... what happened?" she asked weakly. "Did I just miss the really exciting part? "

Perhaps ironically, Kyle found refuge for the Microbus behind an abandoned church. The driveway was blocked by a fence, but it was easily unlocked with a flick of Isabel's hand.

Because of his automotive expertise, Kyle took the lead in all matters related to the care and feeding of the van. The first order of business was disguising it. While Max and Michael changed the color of the paint... their slightly glowing palms wiping the vehicle's light green away in favor of a dull red... Isabel used her powers to mend the nicks and dents in the windshield and body of the van. It wasn't the first time they had recolored their transportation, but it was the most extensive body-repair they'd ever had to do.

Looking briefly at the engine, Kyle was relieved to discover that nothing essential had been broken during the chase.

So jar, he thought.

Michael knew how tired he was, and imagined that Max and Isabel were probably feeling every bit as drained as he was. He knew that using their powers as much as they had today generally required a good eight-hour sleep for a complete recharge. But he also knew that they might not have that much time.

We have to disguise ourselves and get outta Dodge, he thought. They hadn't fully discussed what had just happened, or its ramifications, but this had been far too close a call.

Michael was getting really tired of running from the government, from other aliens, from whoever happened to be hunting them or haunting them from week to week. More and more he wondered if his instincts and his past as Rath, leader of the Antarian military forces, might not be catching up with him. How much longer am I going to be able to hold back? When do all of us finally decide to fight back? While Kyle checked the engine and the rest of the van for any other

damage, Liz was taking care of Maria, who sat, looking weathered, in the front passenger seat. Michael could tell that the taser had really knocked her for a loop, and he wondered if the setting might not have been higher than normal; it seemed to have done quite a number on Isabel as well, at least at the mall.

Walking the length of the van, Michael squatted near the bumper, beside Max. "What do you want the plates to say, Maxwell?" he asked.

Max looked over at the church, then back again. "Only seven letters. C-A-T-H-L-I-C. If they think we're good Christians, maybe they won't take any special notice of our van." He thought for a moment, then added, "And change the state to California. "

Michael smiled, then moved his hand over the formed metal of the rear plate. With a few small pops and pings, the lettering reshaped itself into the requested words. He also changed the registration tag's month and year, then stood and walked back around to the van's front to change the other plate.

On the way, he leaned through the passenger-side window. "Hey," he said simply to Maria. Liz gave her friend a water bottle, then exited through the van's other side and wandered away. The radio chattered in the background.

"Hi, Spaceboy," Maria said, managing a weak smile.

"How are you feeling?" He reached forward and stroked her arm.

"Like hell. I keep shivering, but I'm not cold, and I've got this twitch in my eye, and I think that FBI zapgun gave me split ends." She offered a wobbly smile, then tears welled up in her eyes. She leaned forward, and Michael enfolded her in his arms.

"It's okay," he said softly, his hand stroking her neck and back. "You'll feel better soon. And Isabel can fix your hair. Or I can if you really want, but that might be scarier than dealing with the split ends. "

Michael was gratified to hear Maria's light laughter, which was muffled by his shoulder. She didn't pull away, and moments later, he realized she was crying again. He held her tighter, willing her to feel his love and his resolve that everything really was going to be all right.

After a minute or so had passed, Maria let go and sat straighter in the seat. She wiped under her eyes with the back of her hand and sniffled a bit. "I'm sorry. It must be the jolt of juice that made me so emotional. "

Michael restrained himself from saying what he thought: You're always emotional. Instead he just stroked her arm with his hand. When he sensed she was steady enough, he said, "I need to go finish with the license plates. You gonna be okay? "

She nodded, and he moved to the front of the VW, where Isabel

was finished with the dent repairs, and Kyle was fiddling with the bent windshield wipers.

As Michael crouched in front of the license plate, he said, "Nice driving job, Valenti. "

Kyle looked down at him, a frustrated look on his face. "Hey, if you think you could have done better... " His face changed as Michael looked at him with sincerity. "Oh. Thanks. "

Michael began reshaping the license letters. "I couldn't have done better," he said. "At least not in this vehicle. Give me a bike and I could've escaped with a few less bruises and scrapes. But you got all of us out of the frying pan. "

He didn't look up, but he knew Kyle was probably gaping at him because of this uncharacteristic compliment. Michael knew he was generally the most contrary of the six of them. But sometimes it just seemed right to go against the grain and be a nice guy. Besides, Kyle had done a good job.

"Everybody, get over here!" It was Liz's voice, and she sounded alarmed.

Michael, Kyle, Isabel, and Max converged at the side of the van within seconds. Maria was leaning into the vehicle, her hand on the radio's volume knob. She was listening intently "What is it?" Max asked.

"It's not good news," Maria said gravely.

7 New York City

Rath donned the unconscious riot cop's uniform and all its accoutrements in a small office he'd found in a quiet corner of the warehouse. The uniform and body armor fit a little snugly, but a judicious application of his nearly depleted powers quickly fixed the problem.

Remember the cop's face, Rath thought before exiting the office and hiding his own features... as well as his decidedly uncoplike haircut... beneath the black riot helmet. Running through the warehouse to catch up to the other members of the SWAT team, he tried to hang on to a mental picture of the slumbering cop's face. Might need to copy that mug in a hurry if anybody decides to take a peek under this Darth Vader mask.

But Rath sincerely hoped his limited morphing abilities wouldn't be put to that sort of test. His shapeshifting talents had so far been limited to superficial surface characteristics, such as facial features,

hair, and clothing. He was glad he'd been able to steal a disguise, because in his present condition he doubted he could muster enough energy to morph his body for very long.

Rath soon found himself standing in the weed-strewn parking lot that bounded one side of the abandoned warehouse building, in the midst of more than a dozen riot cops. Under the bright summer sun, he saw immediately that Lonnie and Ava were there as well, their arms handcuffed behind their backs. Low-flying helicopters maneuvered overhead, as though searching for something or someone, churning the air into a stiff wind. Every nerve ending in Rath's body screamed, Danger! He wanted to make a run for the girls, but restrained himself. He knew he hadn't had enough time yet to recover from the battle against the freaks, and the girls must have been similarly depleted to have been caught so fiat-footed. Rath knew that if their powers had been at their peak, Ava could probably have Jedi Knighted the cops into letting the three of them slip away unnoticed, just another trio of nameless, faceless rats bound for the sewers they called home.

Talk about wandering right into the freaking lion's den, Rath thought, his throat going dry.

Keeping himself motionless with an extreme effort of will, Rath watched as the cops hauled the girls, none too gently, toward an official transport vehicle that was idling a short distance away. It looked like an armored Humvee, the type of ride that the Army might use in special operations. One of the helicopters, its body painted black, grew suddenly louder, attracting Rath's attention. He watched as it touched down in the parking lot, just a few dozen yards from the Humvee.

It was only then that Rath noticed the men and women in olive-drab military uniforms, and the hard-looking, crew-cut men wearing tailored black suits. The Men in Black and Green Army Men quickly began running back and forth between the chopper and the armored vehicle. The eyes of the MiBs were hidden behind impenetrable shades, their ears connected to some vast, unseen communications network by slender white coils of wire.

This is definitely no ordinary cop-shop op, Rath thought, his pulse thundering so loudly in his ears that he thought the helicopter pilots must be able to hear it. Some of these guys could understudy for Tommy Lee Jones. He wondered if they used a talking pug as a hunting dog.

The reason for the presence of these army guys and MiBs was fairly clear: They must have caught a whiff of something alien here. But Rath had to wonder exactly which aliens they were tracking. It was possible that their entire purpose here was to track the alien-

possessed derelicts who'd just tried to kill the Royal Three. After all, those freaks weren't very big on subtlety. The way they used ordnance and chewed up their human hosts, they might as well have mailed engraved invitations straight to the Office of Homeland Security.

But if the Feds wanted the freaks, then why would they take Lonnie and Ava instead of leaving them to New York 's Finest? Rath watched as some of the Feds carried small satchels into the warehouse. Within minutes, a pair of agents emerged into the parking lot, carrying what appeared to be body bags... very small ones, which could only have contained the dusty remains of some of the freaks' human hosts.

They've gotta be wondering not just who the freaks are, but also who they were shooting at... and who killed them.

His face still concealed beneath his riot helmet and gas mask, Rath spared a glance at the riot cops who were milling about nearby. Now clear of the clouds of tear gas that still permeated the interior of the warehouse, they had begun removing their gas masks and helmets.

Uh-oh, Rath thought. Pretty soon they're gonna start wondering why I'm so overdressed for this party.

He recalled the time a few years earlier when he and Lonnie had sneaked into a baseball game at Yankee Stadium. They hadn't used any of their alien powers to get past the turnstiles that day. Instead, they had simply walked in, carrying clipboards and wearing the workman's overalls they'd created by rearranging the molecules of their own clothing. "The key to getting into places you're not supposed to be," Lonnie had told him then, "is to just act like you belong. "

Unable to think of anything else to do, Rath walked purposefully toward the Humvee just as one of the MiBs placed a hand on Lonnie's shoulder. A riot-suited cop, apparently a high-ranking one, stood with a hand on Ava's shoulder. A gray-haired, obviously high-ranking military officer also stood by, glaring at the policeman.

The MiB and the top riot cop appeared to be arguing pretty heatedly about something, but their words were lost in the noisy propwash of the helicopter, whose engine was still idling nearby, as if its pilot expected to receive evacuation orders at any moment.

Rath knew he had to risk walking right into the center of things if he was going to have a prayer of learning what was going on... and if there was to be any chance of keeping Lonnie and Ava out of the hands of the Feds.

"... not a very smart move, Sergeant Orman," the MiB was saying.

"I'm not the one making the moves," the cop said, an edge of anger in his voice. He tightened his grip on the wincing Ava's shoulder. "These two don't look like threats to national security to me. They were probably just squatters who were in the wrong place at the

wrong time. And I intend to take them downtown to sort all that out. “

"That's not gonna happen, sir," the MiB said. He appeared to be listening to another simultaneous conversation over his earpiece, which trailed a coil of wire down into his stiff white collar. Rath realized he was now close enough to grab that wire and strangle him with it. Somehow, he resisted the temptation.

Orman fumed. "Listen, you Feds can't just horn in on a police bust without at least offering some kind of explanation. “

The military officer, whom Rath guessed was a major or a colonel, spoke up then. "Oh, I'm afraid we can, Sergeant. You have to defer to the chain of command, just as we do. “

Orman's eyes widened as though the military guy had just sprouted a second head. "I do defer to the chain of command, Colonel. It's called the NYPD. “

"That's pony-league stuff, Sergeant," said the colonel, his eyes flinty, dangerous. "I, on the other hand, answer directly to the Joint Chiefs and the president. “

"President of what?" Orman said, not backing down a bit. Rath couldn't help but admire the man's courage.

"Watch yourself, Orman. “

Orman was apparently just warming up. "Don't try to threaten me, Colonel. I patrol neighborhoods that make Mogadishu look like Disney World. Now, my guys and I saw some pretty weird stuff go down in that warehouse, and so did these two kids. People don't just... crumble away into ash like that. What's really going on here? Terrorist attack? Bioweapon? Alien invasion? “

"Take your pick, Sergeant," the MiB said, chuckling. "You're welcome to wonder about it to your heart's content. After we leave with these detainees. “

"But if you continue obstructing us," the colonel added, "we can easily make room for you in that vehicle as well. How would you like to be the subject of a secret military tribunal, Sergeant? I hear Guantanamo Bay is lovely this time of year. “

Another pair of MiBs appeared and began hustling Lon-nie and Ava into the open rear door of the Humvee. Orman withdrew, taking a step backward with obvious reluctance. But he obviously knew when he was beaten. The Feds were part of a huge machine that could pretty much roll over and flatten anything or anyone that got in its way.

Rath felt helpless. It had become obvious to him that there was nothing he could do to save the girls. / have gotta get out of here, with or without them. Even if that officially makes me the Royal One.

"Hey!" someone behind him shouted.

Rath sighed beneath the gas mask. Here it comes. Squaring his

shoulders in an effort to look confident, he turned toward the voice.

"You can lose the gear now, buddy," said one of the helmetless riot cops, a balding, dark-skinned man with a prominent gold tooth. He was sweating in the hot, black body armor, which gleamed in the sunshine. Rath suddenly realized that perspiration was pooling at the small of his own back, making him shiver.

"In case you missed it, the war's over in there," the cop said, hiking a thumb toward the dilapidated warehouse.

No, "buddy"! think the real war's just about to get going.

The other cop's smile froze in place, his entire demeanor subtly shifting from collegiality to suspicion. Feeling suddenly scrutinized, Rath wondered just how much weirdness the other man had seen inside the building... and what thoughts those sights had put into his head.

The cop let one of his hands drift toward a sidearm holster attached to the bulky Sam Browne belt he wore. Rath felt as though he'd just been caught cheating at cards.

"Why don't you take off your mask and helmet now, pal," he said. It was obviously not a request.

Rath considered blasting him and running, but he knew he wouldn't get far with so many armed goons and MiBs around. And even if he did manage to get away, then what would become of Lonnie and Ava? Now the MiBs only suspected them of having committed the heinous offense of Breathing While Alien. If the cops, the MiBs, or the army were to capture or kill him in the act of trying to pull off a rescue, then the girls would be way past mere suspicion.

"How about it, man?" the cop said, his voice raised. He kept his hand just outside his open holster, like a gunslinger from an old grade-B Western. Several other bare-faced riot cops had drifted toward the mounting confrontation, all of them eyeing Rath curiously.

Rath noticed that Sergeant Orman was among them.

Damn, he thought, listening to a door slam shut on the Humvee. The helicopter noise was intensifying; some of the military people and MiBs were apparently getting ready to depart, no doubt intending to watch from the air while the Humvee took their new prisoners off to be interrogated and dissected.

Orman approached Rath, scowling. "Let me see your face," the sergeant ordered, shouting to be heard over the helicopters rising din.

Rath summoned his mental picture of the officer whose gear he was wearing. Gathering every erg of power he thought he could spare without passing out, he concentrated on morphing his face and hair to match his mental image of the cop he'd left unconscious inside the warehouse.

Then he pulled off his mask and helmet with a stage-fencer's

flourish.

Orman and the cop with the gold tooth suddenly relaxed visibly. So did Rath, at least a little, when he saw their reactions.

"What's the problem, Sarge?" Rath asked Orman, trying hard to project an image of legitimate confusion.

"Nothing, Palfrey. Just thought it was a little strange that you hadn't taken off your gear yet. "

Rath grinned for the benefit of Orman and the other cops. Like Orman, he had to shout to be heard over the chopper noise. "Just thought some of the gas might still be blowing around out here. I got a double lungful of World Trade Center dust last year at Ground Zero, and thought I was gonna cough up a lung. Can't be too careful, you know? "

Orman nodded silently. Though he and the other cops were no longer looking askance at him, Rath saw something peculiar in the sergeant's eyes. The man looked haunted.

After having seen the freaks' human hosts crumble away into so many Pixie Sticks, Rath could certainly understand why.

Pain suddenly lanced through Rath's head. He recognized it immediately. He knew he had to get out of sight right away. If anyone saw him lose control of his shape-changing ability, he'd be right in everybody's crosshairs within a heartbeat.

Then, just when Rath thought he couldn't endure the agony of holding his current shape for another second, Orman shouted something. "Dismissed, Palfrey. I want you to cordon off the crime scene, then head back to the station." Orman turned and headed across the parking lot toward one of the armored police vans. The other cops who had been looking on drifted away, intent on whatever duties they needed to perform.

Still doing his best to hang on to Palfrey's face, Rath turned back toward the government Humvee, around which several MiBs were still swarming. He could see a driver in the cockpit, obviously preparing to get the vehicle underway. A second MiB sat on the passenger side, apparently riding shotgun. Not far away, the black helicopter was beginning to rise into the air.

As far as Rath could tell, no one was paying much attention to him at the moment. And he knew that if he didn't somehow get Lonnie and Ava free of the Humvee right now, he wouldn't get another chance.

If he hesitated, he might never see Lonnie again. It's now or never.

Discarding the gas mask on the blacktop, Rath donned the riot helmet again and relaxed his concentration slightly, letting his features return to normal, including his spiky Mohawk. Thanks to the

helmet and uniform, none of the MiBs, army guys, or riot cops... all of whom were busy at the moment with their appointed tasks... seemed to notice his transformation.

He walked briskly to the other side of the Humvee, the side that faced away from the warehouse and the people milling about it. He stepped into the tall vehicle's blind spot just as the last of the MiBs and military people got inside and disappeared behind the dark-tinted windows of the rear compartment.

Crouching so that no one within the cockpit or the passenger compartment could see him, he quickly approached the drivers side door. He discarded his helmet, removed one of his black gloves, and placed his hand on the door lock. With his other hand, he unholstered the police-issue Glock nine-millimeter pistol he had taken from Palfrey.

His ungloved hand glowed a dull red as he forced as much power as he could muster into the door mechanism. Though he felt somewhat dizzy from the effort, he ignored the sensation and tugged on the door handle with both hands. It swung open without any resistance.

Rath tried to take full advantage of the surprise etched across the faces of both men in the Humvee's cockpit. The MiB who rode shotgun went down quickly when Rath force-fed him a mouthful of Glock handle. Shoving the unconscious man across the Humvee's wide dashboard, Rath swung the barrel of his pistol toward the wide-eyed driver, who was already exercising the better part of valor by raising his empty hands over his head.

"Good boy," Rath said, staring daggers at the driver as he concentrated on changing his appearance to match that of the man behind the wheel.

All at once, the pain in his head returned, this time with a vengeance. Rath felt as though someone had plunged blazing pokers into both of his eyes, and he shut them for a moment as the waves of agony washed over him. He was pushing his powers too hard, and he knew it.

His eyes flew open when something heavy struck him in the chest, and he felt himself turn weightless for a moment. He found himself plummeting backward out of the passenger-side door, gravity and the driver's relentless weight bearing him down to a painful impact with the blacktop beside the vehicle's front wheels.

Rath's breath fled his body when he struck the ground, and now the driver had the advantage. The gun skittered away on the pavement, but the driver ignored it, raining blows onto Rath's face, giving him no opportunity to dodge or regain his feet.

Concentrating, Rath released a focused blast of energy through

his hand, slamming the driver into the side of the Humvee. The black-suited man slumped to the blacktop, unconscious.

Half-stunned himself, Rath rose to his feet and tried to re-enter the Humvee. Through the half-open door, he could see the driver's keys dangling in the ignition. Though still exhausted, he felt his confidence begin to rebound. Maybe there really is a chance to pull this rescue off.

"Freeze!" shouted someone behind him.

Rath turned slowly and found himself facing a trio of armed MiBs. Don't panic, he told himself, focusing past the pain that was all but perforating his head. Just hang on to this face for a while longer. Maybe I can fool 'em just long enough to take the Humvee.

"Boy am I glad to see you guys," Rath said, trying to look relieved to be rescued. He pointed at the driver, who lay on the ground beside the Humvee. "That guy was trying to impersonate me and steal the prisoners."

The agents looked at each other, clearly uncertain. Absurdly, Rath remembered an old Star Trek episode he'd seen recently on the stolen cable-TV rig he'd set up down in the sewer-level lair of the Royal Three. You might have to shoot us both, Spock.

Rath decided he didn't like that idea much. He was aware that the more time these guys had to think about it, the less chance he had of being believed. And he also knew the agents had probably already raised the alarm, via their ear-wires. Reinforcements would be here any second, ready to shoot first and ask questions later.

Suddenly, one of the agents pointed at Rath, then said something to his companions. Rath couldn't hear him over the helicopter noise, but he did manage to read the man's lips.

Look at his face! Rath put a hand up to his brow and immediately confirmed what he already suspected. As his overall power-level waned, so did his ability to hold the shape he'd just adopted. The skin on his face was shifting and bubbling, like water boiling in a pot.

Time had finally run out. Rath decided that waiting any longer could only get him killed, along with Lonnie and Ava.

Diving to the ground to make himself a more difficult target, Rath expended another bolt of raw power in the direction of the armed agents. One of the MiBs went down hard, and the two others responded by hitting the dirt while simultaneously training their weapons in his direction. No one else was running toward them, which Rath took as an encouraging sign.

He released another bolt of energy, and another MiB went down, even as the last one got up and ran toward him, brandishing a strange-looking pistol as he approached.

Rath turned back toward the Humvee's still-open passenger-side

door and dived for the cockpit, trusting that the agent wouldn't shoot him in the back. The Feds want to capture us first. The killing part comes later.

He landed on the seat, then turned to grab the door.

Before he could pull it closed, something struck him hard in the chest, though it made no noise and delivered surprisingly little pain. Fatigue finally began to overtake him, and time was suddenly flowing in a bizarre, variable-speed slow motion. The impact didn't feel like that of a bullet, and he saw a taut length of fine wire gleaming in the sunlight as it stretched across the gap between his body and the approaching agent's gun.

It was only when the second impact, and another length of wire, struck him that he realized what he was up against. As the electrical current surged mercilessly into his body and through his already overloaded central nervous system, a single word entered his mind.

Taser His body rigid, Rath tumbled into and past the Humvee's still-open door. The parking lot rushed up to greet him. He thought briefly of Lonnie before consciousness fled.

Then he thought and felt nothing at all.

8 Cheyenne, Wyoming

"SOo they think we're terrorists now?" Kyle's voice sounded shrill even in his own ears. "What? How? Geeeeeesh!" He yanked at the hair on top of his head in frustration and stomped away, his carefully crafted Buddhist equanimity all in tatters.

"Possible terrorist attack is what they said," Liz responded, her tone solemn.

Kyle stopped, forcing his emotions back under control as best he could. He turned to see how the others were taking the latest news.

Max leaned against the now dent-free side of the Microbus. "Whether they think we're terrorists or alien invaders, we still have a big problem. It was bad enough when the Men in Black or other aliens were chasing us. But now we're at risk from the police as well. "

Michael laughed, but it sounded mirthless. "Yeah, with our luck, we'll end up on America 's Most Wanted. "

"Okay, let's just chill out for a minute," Isabel said, raising her hands level with her head, palms out. "That's not the only thing we need to worry about. "

Maria sighed. "You mean the people who were in the accident Kyle caused? "

"Hey, I did not cause that accident," Kyle said, pointing his finger angrily at Maria. He felt bad enough about what had happened without any of his friends rubbing his nose in it. "I was trying to save all our lives. "

Michael stepped in front of Kyle's finger, his face clouded with emotion. "Step back, Valenti," he growled.

Max put his hand on Michael's shoulder. "Hey, you step back too, Michael. Snapping at each other isn't going to get us anywhere." He sighed, then continued. "Liz, what exactly did that report say about the accident? "

"It said the driver of one of the cars involved and a teenage passenger in another car were both in critical condition," Liz said soberly. "Apparently, the cops or government guys who were chasing us weren't badly hurt at all. "

Michael snorted again. "Yeah, that's just our luck. "

It occurred to Kyle that there was a way to salve his mounting guilt. "So, we should go help those people," he said. "Let Max do his alien faith-healing thing. "

"Too risky," Liz said.

Maria blanched and looked at her friend. "You say it's too risky? You always want to help the helpless. "

"Of course I want to help, but we might put ourselves in even more danger," Liz said. "And if it comes down to a choice between saving all of us, or some people who got hurt because the government wouldn't leave us alone, I'm going to pick all of us. "

No one said anything for a moment, and the only sounds nearby were the leaves on an oak tree as they rustled in the gentle afternoon breeze.

Then Kyle decided he didn't accept Liz's us-or-them choice. There had to be a better way.

"Who's going to expect us to sneak into a hospital? "

Topeka, Kansas Special Agent Suzanne Duff moved through the hallway gracefully, despite the large number of dark-suited men and conservatively dressed women who clogged the area. The legislative session was breaking for the day, and the various assistants, pages, and press people milled about the foyer of the capitol.

Touching her earpiece, Duff heard one of her fellow agents confirm that Senator McNeil was leaving the chamber. She made her way to an appropriate spot and waited. A few seconds later the murmur of the mob changed, and McNeil strode forward, flanked by a pair of Secret Service men... or reasonable bodyguard facsimiles thereof... and trailed by a pack of reporters.

Duff watched them all closely as they walked by. The senator had been receiving death threats for the last two weeks, and although the

vast majority of such threats were harmless, the FBI profilers had been alarmed by the frequency and specificity of these angry missives.

One of the so-called news crewmen was actually an FBI agent who was recording everyone who had any contact with the senator in public. Each of the images was fed into facial recognition software and compared to the federal databases. So far, none of those scanned since her agents had come on board had come up with even a single flag of potential trouble.

The senator was not without his enemies, which made this particular hunt even more difficult. His stance on abortion angered the right-to-lifers, while his recent negative comments about the state's gay community had gotten him into even more hot water. Can't please the right or the left, Duff thought. McNeil is perfect water-cooler discussion material. Everyone has an opinion about him.

Personally, Duff didn't particularly like McNeil. Certainly, he had treated her with respect when she and her staff had interviewed him about the threat-letters, but she had expected that. She wondered what he would feel about her privately... and what he might say publicly... if he knew the truth about her. He could see that she was African-American and a woman easily enough, but he wouldn't have known she was a lesbian just by looking at her. The trijecta for bigots, she thought with a rueful smile. A black gay woman. She suspected that McNeil would have rather had a married white male agent heading up his case. Fortunately for Duff, one didn't always get to pick one's protectors.

As McNeil neared the elevator, Duff felt the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Directing her voice down to her collar microphone, she said, "Watch the woman in the blue coat approaching to the senator's left. She's got something in her hand. Doesn't feel... "

Before she had finished, the woman made her move. Her hand flashed out, crimson liquid spraying outward from it all over the senator, his aide, and a reporter from Channel 6 news.

The woman started to yell, "This is the blood of the unborn...," but in less than a second, two FBI agents had tackled her. The Secret Service men drew their guns and stepped in front of McNeil, forming a human shield around him.

"Step back! Everybody step back!" Duff yelled, pushing the reporters and everyone else away from the immediate vicinity. Amazingly, they obeyed her. Perhaps it was because of the already-drawn guns that backed up Duff's warning, or maybe in the shock of the moment they were merely happy to be told what to do.

The woman was screaming as the agents held her down. One had drawn her hands up behind her back and was kneeling on her neck, while the other was efficiently frisking her. Duff knelt to retrieve the

item the woman had dropped, being careful to grab it with a handkerchief so as not to disturb any fingerprints. The item was a large coffee cup, its insides coated in a viscous red liquid. Blood. Or something like it. She sniffed it. No, not blood.

She stood and faced McNeil, whose aide was busy wiping the spatters off the senators face. "Are you all right, sir?" Duff asked.

"Yeah, just a little red in the face," McNeil said, cracking a weak smile. Duff knew that the self-deprecating sense of humor had gone far in getting him votes, further proof that theater was as important on the Beltway as were political platforms.

"It smells like syrup of some sort," Duff said, keeping her voice low enough that the press couldn't hear her across the foyer. "Probably watered down. "

"Hmmm, well, it's going to stain this marvelous suit," McNeil's aide said.

"It's all right, Delroy. Quit fussing," McNeil said. "So, you think this is my stalker? "

Duff shook her head. "We won't really know for a while yet. She could be the one, or she could be just a random member of the unhappy public. "

McNeil grunted and nodded. As the elevator door opened in front of him, he looked back toward Duff. "Yes, well, I'll expect a report soon." It wasn't a question.

It took almost an hour to process the woman to the point where Duff could take a break from the thick of things. She sat down with a thump into the chair behind her temporary desk and toggled the computer on.

A flashing icon told her she had new mail, and she clicked on it to initiate the program. Once there, she entered her federal I.D. number, her password, and a secondary password.

She scanned the subject headings, then clicked on one that said "XMA94... Cheyenne, Wyoming." XMA- 94 was the code for unusual altercations, often related to suspected homeland terrorist cells, white supremacist splinter factions, or other armed groups.

Duff read through the file quickly, noting the amount of information that wasn't included in it. Something's being covered up here, she thought. There were too many nonspecific terms, and the clearance codes for the initial strike orders were high-level ones. She had seen this kind of thing before.

Scrolling down, Duff stopped on multiple photos taken by security cameras at the scenes of the Cheyenne confrontation. They had yet to be enhanced, but it didn't matter. Duff recognized the kids in the photos.

Hell, they aren't exactly kids anymore. Kyle Valenti she

recognized best. She had met the ex-sheriff's son in May of 2001, while working on her second case. The assignment had gotten her involved with finding a missing girl named Laurie Dupree. As the case unfolded, Dupree's abduction was linked to an archaeologist named Grant Sorenson, a group of teens in Roswell, New Mexico, and the town's half-crazed sheriff.

At least, Jim Valenti had seemed to be half crazed when she met him. He had been caught up in an expanding web of lies that ultimately cost him his job. Yet Duff could sense that deep down, Valenti had believed he was doing the right thing.

By the end of the case, Duff had seen things she wouldn't have thought possible. She had been forced to shoot Sorenson after he threatened her and Valenti with a gun. Afterward, he had kidnapped a Roswell teenager named Isabel Evans, taking her to Tucson, Arizona, where some kind of green jellyfish emerged from emerald crystals that were embedded in Sorenson's chest. Another Roswell teen, Michael Guerin, had somehow psychically sucked all the oxygen out of the room containing Sorenson's corpse and the jellyfish, killing the creature that had possessed him.

Later Valenti had counseled her to doctor her official report about the incident. And although Duff didn't feel good about it, she had done so. She wasn't sure what special psychic powers Isabel Evans or Michael Guerin had, nor did she know exactly what it was that had inhabited the body of Grant Sorenson. But she knew that her FBI superiors would not have looked kindly on her reports if she had put in all the incredible details.

Everyone knew about the other FBI agents who chased aliens and spooks; they had been relegated to the basement. Duff didn't want to end up in the basement. She told Valenti she wanted to make assistant director by the time she reached thirty-five, and though she suspected it might take a few more years than that, the AD job was still her goal.

Duff had been extensively interviewed after the incidents in Roswell and Arizona, not just by her superiors, and not only about the justifiable shooting of Sorenson. Some other governmental agency had also been involved in debriefing her, but their questions were more about her interaction with the sheriff and the Roswell teens than about the abduction and shooting. They'd been interested essentially in hearing about anything "unusual" that may have occurred, apart from the case itself. For some reason, their probing made her dig her mental heels in deeper, increasing her determination not to tell them about the odd powers the Roswell kids had apparently manifested.

Now, shaking her head to end her woolgathering, Duff renewed her concentration on the screen in front of her. Among the images there, she recognized Kyle Valenti and Michael Guerin, though their

looks had changed considerably since she had last seen them two years earlier. Another image was a poorly taken photograph, evidently shot through an oddly darkened window. She thought she could make out the features of Isabel Evans.

The report didn't name the teens, but did note that another male and two females were also "persons of interest." Duff suspected that the male was either Isabel's brother... Max... or Alex Whitman. The girls would likely be Liz Parker and Maria DeLuca.

The fact that the report didn't name the kids was one warning flag for Duff; another was the absence of the original strike orders. They had already been classified, and all internal memos were to be routed through one specific office. A specially prepared press statement was boiler-plate obfuscation, and other information was blacked out.

They're covering something up, Duff thought. Not that secrets were unusual in the domestic intelligence game, but this smelled bad. She suspected that the men who had interrogated her two years earlier were probably involved in this; the older one had been badly scarred, and the younger one struck her as extremely unpleasant, almost feral.

I wish these kids well, Duff thought. From what the report did say, their actions sounded more defensive than offensive. She seriously doubted that they posed a danger to anyone.

I hope they manage to get out of Dodge before the net closes around them.

Cheyenne, Wyoming Max watched as dusk started to fall. The group had been unable to reach a consensus about whether to risk going to the hospital to heal the people who'd been injured during their escape from the mall.

Max decided the matter would be better faced after a few of their own urgent needs had been taken care of first. Kyle agreed reluctantly, but ultimately went along with the group's decision to wait a few hours, especially since a recent news report had upgraded the status of the injured pair from "critical" to "guarded." Although the report also said that one of the patients was comatose, and that both would remain overnight in the hospital's critical care unit, Max reasoned that they could wait a few hours without necessarily condemning anyone to death.

With the group mollified for the moment, Max concentrated on what they were going to do in the meantime. They all really needed to eat, and the alien trio was in particular need of rest, if only to recharge their powers. Max acknowledged that going back to the hotel they had been staying at prior to the raid on the mall was risky; they didn't know if it was being watched or not. So Max decided that, for now, they would stay here, in the shadows of the abandoned church.

Nobody argued.

"Kyle and I will go get some food," Max said. "I saw a chain of fast-food restaurants about ten blocks away. "

"You need to be disguised," Liz said with a frown. "If any of us go out in public, we'll have to change our looks. At least a little. "

"Oh great, it's alien makeover time again," Michael said with a groan. He was lying down in the back of the van, looking uncharacteristically carefree.

"It's necessary, Michael," Maria said.

Isabel stepped forward, her hands up. "Who's first? "

"I'll go first," Max said. Turning to Michael, he added, "We're going to need some money, though. "

Michael sat up and mock-saluted. "After being called a terrorist, I guess 'counterfeiter' isn't going to add too many more years onto my sentence. "

Following their first month or so on the road, Max had stumbled onto an idea on how to get the money they needed to continue their travels. They couldn't really make the money, and if he continued to create diamonds out of coal... as he had done for Liz when he'd asked her to marry him, and then again after Stonewall... they might establish a pattern that would get them into trouble.

But weeks ago, Max had seen a store clerk holding a twenty-dollar bill up to the light. When asked what he was doing, the clerk explained about the security thread woven into the linen of the bill, as well as the color-shifting ink. These two elements were some of the more sophisticated anticounterfeiting steps being taken lately in the printing of paper currency.

Max immediately saw the solution to their money problems, although it had taken a great deal of research and weeks of practice before Michael had perfected his new "craft." Using his powers, he resequenced the elements of a one-dollar bill into a five- or a twenty-dollar bill. Like repainting the Microbus, all of the chemical and physical elements were already in place; they merely had to be rearranged somewhat.

Although not everyone in the group liked Max's and Michael's financial solution, they all knew that as long as they were on the run, holding down jobs for money was out of the question. Max and Michael had both reasoned that since the money they were altering had come from the government... and that it was the government that had forced them to be on the run in the first place... then nobody was actually getting hurt, except maybe the Treasury Department. Indeed, they had seen several times already that their "funny money"... Kyle insisted on referring to the alien-created paper as "quatloos," for some reason... passed smoothly through counterfeiting-detection devices.

Now, as Michael got to work on turning the Cybernet Cafe's one-dollar bills into twenties, Isabel stepped up toward Max. "I think we're going to go really short," she said, sparing a glance toward Liz. Max saw her nodding.

Isabel's hands glowed slightly, and Max's shaggy dark hair began to disintegrate. A very faint burning smell rose in the air as the hair disappeared. Within minutes, he had a spiky flattop with short sides.

Isabel put a finger up to her mouth and squinted at her brother. "Something's missing," she said. Then, running her fingertips down from Max's oversized ears to his cheekbones, she drew in a set of sideburns. The hair follicles extruded a quarter-inch of dark hair in seconds, as if the alien energy from Isabel's hands were a grow-lamp and the emerging hairs were hungry plants.

"Oh, very nice," Liz said, moving to stand next to Max. She ran her fingers along the side of his head, and he smirked.

"Okay, next," Isabel said, as Kyle moved to stand in front of her.

"I want some facial hair too," Kyle said. "I didn't know you could even do that. "

Isabel smiled enigmatically, clearly not willing to part with all of her secrets. Max understood the impulse, a habit born of long practice.

"What do you want?" Isabel asked Kyle.

Kyle looked thoughtful. "I'm thinking a mustache and goatee. And maybe medium short hair, dirty blond." Kyle grinned at her, as though hoping he had just asked Isabel to re-create him as her ideal man.

"That is so not you," Maria said.

"Hey, the customer is always right," Kyle shot back.

"Whatever," Isabel said with a sigh.

Isabel closed her eyes and lowered her head, stifling a snort of laughter. Then she raised her hands and placed them on Kyle's temples.

She looked straight into his eyes, finding his gaze trusting and hopeful, like it was when he was calm after he'd meditated. This was the Kyle that she liked, the guy who was so much like his father. He was protective and caring, kind of like a big, loyal dog.

"What?" Kyle said. "What are you smiling about? "

Isabel hadn't realized she'd been smiling. "Oh, nothing," she said, quickly altering her expression to neutral. She let her power flow through her hands, changing the colors and length of Kyle's hair. Almost instantly, it became shorter and lighter, and she gave it a bit of a wave.

Finished with that part of her task, she moved her fingertips to his upper lip. She could feel his warm exhalations as she did so, and the sensation kindled memories of warmth and intimacy. But not with Kyle. With Jesse.

But Kyle's breath felt warm like Jesse's, and his lips as soft...

She shook her head almost imperceptibly refocusing her attention on her task. Kyle's follicles were stimulated, and the mustache and goatee suddenly grew quite full under her touch. She concentrated a bit harder, and the pigment in the facial hair itself changed to a light blond. The hair felt soft under her fingers, and she had to admit that it did look flattering on Kyle's angular face, Maria's snarky comment notwithstanding. "All done," she said, moving her hands away.

Kyle touched her hands momentarily. "Thanks," he said quietly.

As Kyle and Max went to retrieve the money from Michael, Isabel noticed that Liz was staring at her rather intently. Isabel turned and walked away, toward a small grassy hillock under some trees.

She sat down and stretched her legs out, rolling her shoulders to work out the tension. Even though it had been hours since the ordeal at the mall, Isabel still didn't feel quite right.

"Hey," Liz called from nearby. She had approached so quietly that Isabel hadn't noticed.

"Hey," Isabel returned the greeting.

Liz sat down next to her, and smoothed her long, brown hair out of her eyes with one hand. "Are you okay?"

"Physically, mentally, or emotionally?" Isabel asked.

Liz grinned ever so slightly. "D. All of the above."

"I'm still a bit sore and disconnected, and drained from using my powers for so long," Isabel said. She knew that wasn't the core of Liz's question, though.

She had never felt especially close to Liz, but over the past few months, that had begun to change. Even though Liz was one of the youngest of their group, she had taken on a more mature, almost mothering role. Isabel had seen it before in Liz's behavior with Max and Maria, and to an extent with Kyle and Michael. But it had taken a while for Isabel to warm up to Liz's emotional support.

"Mentally, I'm tired. Really dog tired." She smiled and added, "I've got less energy in my head now than Juliette Lewis uses on film."

Liz giggled. "That's tired."

"And emotionally... I miss Jesse. I miss having someone to snuggle with, someone to hold me, someone who tells me I'm beautiful, someone who will eat my pathetic attempts at breakfast and still smile."

Isabel looked off into the gathering darkness, then continued. "You and Max have each other, Michael and Maria have each other, but Kyle and I don't have anyone. It's gotta be weird for him, traveling with his ex- girlfriend all the time. And I know he's got some feelings for me, too."

Liz nodded slowly, but didn't say anything.

"And look at my life. I never let anyone in Roswell get close to me in high school until it was too late. I dated Grant Sorenson, and he turned out to be a Gandarium-possessed killer. I didn't take Alex seriously until..." Isabel's voice trailed off.

She looked away, focusing on something to the side, not wanting Liz to see the tears welling up in her eyes. "You know, everything about my past on Antar says that I'm some spoiled princess who slept around on her lover and brought down the Royal Family And according to my genetic template, I should be dating Michael. He was Rath in our previous lives. "

Liz snorted. "Yeah, well, Max and Tess were 'fated to be together' too, and we've all seen how well that turned out." Isabel heard the anger in Liz's voice; she herself hated Tess as well... for killing Alex... but she knew that her own wounds didn't run nearly as deep as Liz's.

Isabel decided to redirect the conversation. "When I met Jesse, we seemed to be so right together. But I spent so much time hiding who I really was from him..." "

She put her hand up to wipe a tear from her cheek. "Max thinks that Jesse isn't 'the One.' That I was settling. That in my desire to live a normal life with a normal future, I settled for Jesse. But look at what he did for me when he found out the truth. He killed that FBI agent to protect me.

"When we left Roswell, I knew beyond a doubt that he loved me, and that I loved him," Isabel continued. "But what good is that now? I can't see him or touch him. I can't tell him what I'm feeling or ask what he's feeling. I can't even call him. "

"Can't you dreamwalk him?" Liz asked.

Isabel shuddered, but tried not to let the feelings show on her face. "The last time I dreamwalked him, things didn't... go well." That was an understatement. Isabel had seen Jesse preparing divorce papers on her, to nullify their short marriage. She still didn't know if it was his real plan, or a figment of his dreaming mind.

"So call him," Liz said simply.

Isabel looked confused. "Um, hello, not supposed to have contact. "

"Screw it," Liz said, her tone conspiratorial. "It's not like the MiBs don't know we're in Cheyenne anyhow. We're on the news\ Jesse may even have heard something. Maybe he can help us legally somehow. I don't know." Liz put her hand on top of Isabel's. "But I do know that you need to talk to your husband. "

Isabel sighed, then looked back toward the Microbus. "I just don't know..." She trailed off.

"Wait until Max and Kyle go for food," Liz said. "There's a phone booth a few blocks from here. I'll walk down there with you. It'll give

Michael and Maria some 'alone time' together. You can call Jesse from there, and it will be our secret. “

Isabel swallowed hard and squeezed Liz's hand. "Thank you, Liz. “

Boston, Massachusetts Jesse Ramirez was dozing in an easy chair in front of the television when the phone rang. Startled, he sat up quickly, knocking the TV remote onto the floor. "Hello?" he said as he picked up the receiver.

"Hi. I need to talk to my attorney," the voice on the line said.

Jesse recognized it immediately. Isabel! His mind raced, and he stood up. "Can you call me right back, or are you on your one phone call? “

He heard confusion in her tone. "I can call back, Jesse, but... “

He interrupted her. "Call 617-555-3488. You got that? 617-555-3488. “

As soon as he heard her say "Yes," he hung up. Moments later, he was sprinting to the bedroom. He opened a box on a bedside table and grabbed a cell phone. Switching it on, he was gratified to see that it was still charged. A moment later, it vibrated in his hand, announcing an incoming call.

"Hello, thanks for calling me back," he said. Before Isabel could reply, he added, "Please hold while I get some paper for taking notes. “

Slipping his shoes back on, he exited the house and made his way out of the building and onto the street. He scanned the nearby cars, but didn't see anyone sitting in them.

"Isabel?" he asked, putting the phone back up to his ear.

"Yeah, it's me. What's all this about?" He heard the concern in her voice.

"Just precautions," Jesse said, still looking around the area. "I don't know whether they've still got my place under surveillance, or if they have a way to track my phone calls, but I don't want to risk it. This is a cell phone I got from a client, so the number's not registered to me. “

"Hey, you're pretty good at covering your tracks," Isabel said. A beat passed, then she added, "It's great to hear your voice. “

Jesse sat down on the front steps of a nearby apartment building. "You too, baby. It's been way too long. How are you? “

"I'm fine. We're all fine. Well, mostly fine. We had a bit of a run-in today with the police and some government guys. “

Jesse was shocked. "You're in Cheyenne? “

"Oh, no. It's on the news there, too?" Isabel sounded sick.

"Yeah, but they didn't release anyone's names or pictures," Jesse said quickly, hoping to reassure her. "I saw a quick blurb about it on one of the cable news channels. I heard the FBI is saying the incident's

still being investigated as a possible terrorist action. “

"They cornered us in a mall somehow. I don't know how they found us. “

"Is there anything I can do?" Jesse asked.

"Yes." Isabel hesitated a bit, then quietly said, "Tell me that you still love me. “

"Oh, baby, of course I do. I love you. I miss you. I want to be with you. “

"I was afraid you wanted to move on." He heard doubt in her voice.

The thought had crossed Jesse's mind almost every day over the last two months, but he'd tried to push it out as quickly as it had entered. "Iz, I tried to go with you guys. You wanted me to come to Boston instead. I'd still come with you if you wanted me to. There's nothing I want more than to be back with you. “

"Okay. Good. Because I love you, too," she said. "I don't know what's going to happen to us. They don't seem to have given up their search. Sometimes it feels like we're never going to find peace. “

He agreed, but didn't want to tell her that. The situation with the Feds had escalated in the time since he had found out his wife was half alien. First the shadowy government men had tried to force him to inform on his own wife, resulting in his being forced to kill an agent to defend her. And then, just when things seemed to be calming down, Tess came back to Earth with Max's baby and blew up Rogers Air Force Base. The assault the federal agents had launched at the West Roswell High graduation ceremony demonstrated how determined these men were to capture or kill Isabel and her friends.

Clearly, given today's actions against them in Wyoming, the government men had not abandoned the chase. What will make them finally give it up? Is there a way to help Isabel and Max and Michael find some kind of peace? "You'll have peace, Iz. We'll have peace. We'll be together again, and someday we'll tell our gray-skinned, big-eyed alien kids all about your misadventures after West Roswell High." He hoped she would hear the humor in his voice, and take heart in it.

"What makes you think the kids won't look like you!" she asked. Clearly he had lifted her spirits.

"Well, Max's baby was fully human, so I guess we can hope for the best," he said. But as he listened for a reply, he heard another voice over the line... Liz's voice, coming from somewhere near Isabel. She said something he couldn't make out, and then he heard a crackle on the line.

He heard Isabel cry out briefly, followed by the same from Liz. Next came a banging sound.

Then the line went dead.

1 he ride to the nondescript building in the outlying warehouse district took half an hour or so, during which time the three prisoners were kept closely guarded. The boy was still unconscious, and the two girls stayed very still, given the armed guards bracketing each of them.

Colonel Bertram rode in the front of the transport vehicle rather than take a chopper back to base; the Humvees didn't get second glances from the locals, but black helicopters might tend to attract more attention, so they were housed nearby. Besides, Bertram didn't want to let this group out of his sight.

He was convinced that at least one of the detainees was a fugitive the Special Unit was looking for. Bertram was not a part of the S.U., but he had served with Matthew Margolin back in Vietnam, and had stayed friends with him during the three decades since. The secrets both men carried of atrocities committed by their group during the war were binding enough, but in addition Bertram actually liked Margolin.

The colonel wasn't ultimately clear on what it was that the Special Unit did... other than covert ops... or why it wanted these kids, but the things he had seen this morning told him that whatever it was, it was something very unusual. The teenage boy had actually appeared to change his face, and he had knocked down several agents with a gesture of his hand. And then there were the strange ash-piles the troops had found in the warehouse, heaps of dusty residue that apparently had been human beings at some point not too long before.

Bertram wasn't sure whether the kids were some kind of psychics or experiments run amok. Sure, the idea sounded like some kind of science-fiction story or something. Hell, he had loved Stephen King's Firestarter, but he was reasonably certain that The Shop and Lot Six didn't actually exist. Though if it does, it's exactly the type of thing that Margolin would be involved with, he thought. And Matt does look a little like George C. Scott from the movie. He chuckled to himself.

Several minutes later, the caravan arrived at the underground "office," and the three captives were placed in solitary cells equipped with reinforced steel bars.

Bertram put the soldiers who had been in the transport on guard duty. They knew what the kids... or at least the boy, when he was conscious... were capable of, and would be more alert than new

assigns. He made his way back to his office and sat behind his desk. Using a series of protocols and passwords, he logged in to a database from his desktop computer.

He and his men had been led to the warehouse by an anonymous tip, and had arrived to discover that the police were already on premises. According to these files, the tipster appeared to have been right on target. One of the girls was wanted in conjunction with the destruction of Rogers Air Force Base near Roswell, New Mexico, in May 2002. Tess Harding. The report was vague about the extent of her involvement, but clearly marked her as a person of interest who should be detained for questioning. Agents were referred to a number that Bertram recognized as a Special Unit line.

Very interesting, he thought. What could a small blond teenage girl from New Mexico have to do with the immense explosion that had decimated Rogers? She doesn't exactly fit the al-Qaeda profile.

Bertram scrolled down the page to see if he could discover any further clues to the mystery before calling Margolin. A few lines onto the second page, he felt a shot of adrenaline hit his system. Linked to Tess Harding were six other names of possible accessories, and fellow persons of interest. He clicked on the first two files to open them.

Maxwell Evans opened first. Doesn't look familiar.

Isabel Evans. His mouth opened, and he shut it with a snap. That was the other girl they had captured. Her hair was wilder now, and she looked as though she had lived a lot of years since the picture was taken, but it was undeniably the same girl.

He hurriedly clicked the other files open.

Elizabeth Parker. Nothing. Maria DeLuca. Nothing again. Kyle Valenti. Nada.

And then Michael Guerin. Bertram smiled. Another hit. This was the kid they had zapped into submission. The one who had changed his face and used the weird powers against them. Guerin had quite a file built up as well, including several brushes with the law, and a murder trial at which he'd been found not guilty. Since he was a juvenile, his record was supposed to be sealed and expunged, but this was a military intelligence file. We don't expunge anything, Bertram thought.

He noticed that all of the kids were from Roswell, which made sense, if they were connected to this Tess Harding girl. The only thing he knew about Roswell was the myth about UFOs and a supposed government cover-up of the existence of aliens and...

The thought hit Bertram like a shot. What if this Guerin kid isn't some kind of Lot Six psychic mutant, but a real, live alien? He knew the notion was absurd, and yet it could almost make sense. This could be what the Special Unit is about.

There was only one way he was going to find out the truth, and he knew just the man who could tell him.

He picked up the phone and dialed Margolin's number.

Washington, D.C.

Matthew Margolin was pleased. A few minutes ago he had heard from Agent Harrison that the Roswell group had been located in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and local agents from the field office had been dispatched to capture them. He paged Bartolli, then grabbed some of the things he'd need.

He stepped out of his office and spoke to his assistant. "Ellen, please send out a Code Seven alert. I want a plane waiting, and eight armed agents. "

"Yes, sir, Mr. Margolin," she said, and began simultaneously punching keys on her computer and tapping a code into the phone. Her ambidexterity made her a highly valued assistant.

Margolin's cell phone rang, and he flipped it open. "Dale? "

There was a moment of silence on the other end, then a familiar voice. "Not Dale. This is Colonel Grant Bertram. Do I have Matthew Margolin? "

Margolin ducked back into his office and closed the door. "Yeah, this is Matt. Hey, Grant. What's up? "

"Are you still in charge of that Special Unit?" Bertram asked.

"Why? "

"Because if you are, then I'm about to make your day. "

Margolin's interest was piqued. "Yes, the Unit is still mine. What do you have for me? "

"Very early in the A.M. we got a tip that some fugitives would be at a certain location here in New York City. When we arrived, the local cops were already there, and the scene was a disaster. We're talking gas, guns, and the whole shebang. "

Bertram paused for a moment, as if to accentuate what he was going to say next. "There were three people captured. The rest seemed to vanish or something. All they found were piles of ash where the suspects used to be. "

Margolin nodded. "Who were the captures? "

"I believe they're some kids you're very interested in.

Some kids from Roswell. Isabel Evans, Michael Guerin, and Tess Harding." Bertram's words hung in the air.

Margolin tried to contain the excitement in his voice, but knew he hadn't quite succeeded. "You have them in custody? "

"Yeah, here on-site. They've been separated, and one of them's been juiced. He gave us quite a bit of trouble during capture. He displayed some... unusual abilities. You got a clue what I mean? "

"I might," Margolin said, keeping his tone as noncommittal as

possible. "Were there any others with the three you caught? "

"If there were, the cops didn't get them," Bertram said. "The troops seemed pretty freaked out, on the whole. A few said they saw people turning to ash, but there was a lot of smoke and gas in the air, so who knows what they really saw. And there was some kind of explosion in the basement of the building. Apparently the RD. was on-scene because there had been gunshots reported. It looked like some sort of gang war was going on. "

Bartolli appeared at the door. He looked as slick as a shark in his dark suit, and even though he carried only a briefcase, Margolin knew that the man was armed for serious hunting.

"Grant, I need you to hold for a second while I check on something. "

"Okay," Bertram said.

Margolin put the cell phone on hold, then placed it on a white noise box to prevent any stray sounds from getting through. "An old buddy of mine from back in the day... he's a colonel in the army now... -just called from New York City. It seems he's captured Tess Harding, Michael Guerin, and Isabel Evans. "

Bartolli raised an eyebrow. "Think they split up? "

"Sounds like that could be the case." Margolin held up the three printouts that Harrison had sent him of the intercepted e-mails. "These are from Liz Parker, Maria DeLuca, and Kyle Valenti. "

"Maybe the aliens split off from the humans?" Bartolli offered.

"We don't know what Parker is, since she's exhibited unusual abilities as well." Margolin's mind flashed back to a very frightened woman they had interrogated in Roswell; after Max and Liz had rescued her from a mugger, she'd been reluctant to give details about her saviors. Bartolli had "persuaded" her to help them.

"So, where's Max Evans? "

"A very good question," Margolin said. "Is he with his brunette girlfriend, or was he with his old blond girlfriend? Bertram says no others were recovered, but it sounds like there might have been room for escape. "

"Three in the hand in New York, a few more about to be captured in Wyoming. I'd say we've got a pretty good grouping of them," Bartolli said, grinning.

Margolin nodded. He picked up the phone and toggled it on. "You there, Grant? "

"Yes, sir. You could get better elevator music to play on your 'hold' line than that Barry Manilow stuff, though. "

"I'll work on that. Meanwhile, we're on our way there right now, by plane. Give us an hour. And give me the location of the building you're in. "

Margolin scribbled the address down, and then spoke again. "Grant, you need to pay close attention to this. Under no circumstances are you, or any other persons, to have contact with these three. Got it? No one. "

"Got it. "

"I assume you have them in airtight rooms? "

"Of course. "

Margolin smiled. "Good. We'll have a little cocktail prepared for them when we get there. Thanks for the call, Grant. Excellent work. It won't go unnoticed if I have anything to say about it. "

Margolin rang off, and turned to Bartolli. "Let's go get ourselves some aliens. "

10 Cheyenne, Wyoming

Maria shifted slightly to get more comfortable, trying not to wake Michael. They were lying in the back of the Microbus on their sleeping bags. Liz had told them that she was going off with Isabel, not so subtly offering them some much-needed time alone.

For about two minutes, she and Michael had made out, and then Michael had fallen asleep. Maria was more frustrated than offended; she knew how much energy Michael had expended that day, even if she hadn't been conscious to see it. But she'd still wanted him to be with her.

Feeling him breathing next to her, looking at his peaceful face, she could almost get lost in the moment. Almost forget that they were dressed in one of their five changes of clothes, traveling with four of their friends in a van, on the run from government goons and skin-shedding aliens.

Almost, but not quite.

Four years ago, she never would have imagined her life would be what it was today. Not even in a creative writing assignment in Mrs. Wong's class. Four years ago, her best friends were Liz Parker and Alex Whitman, and she sometimes hung out with the granola- rock crowd.

Working at the Crashdown Cafe as a waitress was her job, but she'd always had bigger dreams. Music and the stage called to her, and she knew that one day kids would be singing along to her songs like they did to the music of Melissa Etheridge or E J. Harvey or Dido. She wasn't sure exactly how she was going to get out of Roswell, but she knew she would. She once shared that dream with Billy Darden, the boy she'd met at band camp at the age of thirteen, the first boy she

had ever kissed.

And then, on that fateful day in September, 1999, Liz had been shot at the Crashdown, the victim of a random altercation. In the days and weeks that followed, Maria was inexorably drawn into a secret world that had existed around her for years without her knowledge. Her mother made cheap alien tchotchkes for her shop, never realizing that three of Maria's new friends actually were half alien.

Looking back at the last four years, Maria sometimes had a difficult time seeing the good that had come from her association with the aliens. Her grades had suffered, her mother's Jetta had certainly suffered, and her other friendships had all but evaporated. And then Alex had been killed, as part of Tess's alien plot.

The only positive result was her relationship with Michael, and even that was tumultuous at best. His moods were so mercurial that she was never sure if her comments or attention would set him off. Manic- depressive, thy name is Michael, she often thought. Not that she was the poster child for emotional stability, but she realized that their relationship mirrored that of her mother and father, when they had been together. But just because she was aware of the emotional roller coaster that life with Michael represented, that knowledge didn't seem to help her stay away from him. It was a kind of codependency, and she was caught in its loop.

Because she loved him. And he loved her.

But was that enough? She had finally gotten a chance to pursue her lifelong goal last year. Performing with Jim Valenti and his neo-country band, The Kit-Shickers, she had been spotted by music producers and was offered a recording contract in New York City. But she soon discovered that they wanted to "manufacture" her, to remold her into a pop princess rather than allow her to make the kind of music that was important to her.

Before leaving for the big city, Maria had talked with Liz. She still remembered what Liz had said: "You should find a way to compromise without losing what's important to you, because if you don't do this, you are always going to be miserable. "

Shortly afterward, she had turned down the music producers and returned to the alien drama that was Roswell. And a few months later, she had been forced to choose between a life on the run with Michael and her friends, or staying behind in the small town to face a certain, if dull, future.

But is my future any less uncertain now? What do I have to look forward to? I'm not doing any music now, my relationship with Michael isn't growing, and, on top of that, I got tasered today I Michael snored quietly beside her, and sleepily placed his hand on her arm.

The touch was electric, but not alien. Maria was keenly aware that of all the members of their group, she was the only one who not only wasn't alien but also hadn't been made partially alien by Max's healing powers.

She could walk away and never worry about being burdened with seeing the future, or shooting sparks from her fingertips. She was a completely normal human girl who just happened to be in love with an alien guy.

But she could walk away.

Couldn't she? Liz stood on the corner and looked down the street. At first, she didn't recognize the two men coming toward her a few blocks away, and then the light from a passing car illuminated them briefly. Max and Kyle! Backing up, Liz turned and headed down the block toward the pay phone on which Isabel was talking to Jesse. They hadn't been conversing for very long, but Max and Kyle had apparently finished making their food run faster than anticipated.

Isabel was facing away when Liz approached. Liz coughed slightly to get her attention, and heard Isabel say, "What makes you think the kids won't look like you? "

Liz reached out to touch Isabel's shoulder, and started to tell her that Max and Kyle were coming.

The instant her hand made contact with Isabel, Liz's vision abruptly snapped into focus, as she saw a flash of a window exploding... Then men in dark uniforms, their guns pointed directly at her... Next she saw a placid coastline through the rounded window of an airplane, the sun-dappled water far below her colored a startling lapis lazuli blue... And suddenly she was strapped down onto a table, with tubes and wires entering various parts of her body. She could see her reflection in the edges of the metallic plates and the hoods of the lights above her. But it wasn't herself she was seeing.

It was Isabel.

Liz realized that her head... Isabel's head... was wounded and bloody, and she heard a whining sound like a dentist's drill beside one of her ears. She saw a masked doctor looking down at her, his pitiless, slate-colored eyes clearly visible through his transparent goggles. She could see blood spraying robins-egg patterns across his smock, his mask, his goggles... Next came pain and utter darkness.

Roswell, New Mexico Jeff Parker finished putting the garnishes on the dinner plates, making sure that every element of the food, from preparation to presentation, was as perfect as he could manage. He prided himself that the Crashdown nearly always got newspaper reviews as one of the best diners in southeastern New Mexico. But this order deserved special attention: It was for Jim Valenti and Amy DeLuca.

The months since graduation had been difficult. After the commencement ceremony, the Parkers had been interrogated by black-suited men from the government, but they had no answers for them. Not only did they not know where Liz or the others had gone, they also had no idea why they had suddenly skipped town. Amy DeLuca had been similarly interviewed, as had the Evanses and Deputy Valenti.

In a private meeting, Phillip Evans had promised Jeff and Nancy that he was reasonably certain that the kids were all okay, and that the reason the government was looking for them was not related to any criminal activities on the kids' part. Phillip's explanation had calmed everyone somewhat, but after Max's and Liz's run-in with the law up in Utah over a year ago, Jeff had to admit, if only to himself, that he still had his doubts.

Jeff knew that something strange had been going on between Liz and her friends during their high school years, but it wasn't until a month after they'd disappeared that he and Nancy had discovered what it was. A FedEx delivery had yielded a box with several cookbooks that Jeff couldn't recall having ordered, but as he opened one of them, he'd discovered that it had been hollowed out. Nestled within its center was Liz's journal.

The journal had explained everything, especially how Liz's world had changed so completely after she'd been shot during the altercation at the Crashdown three years ago. After closing that evening in the diner, as he read through Liz's journal entries, Jeff marveled at the secrets his daughter had kept, and the adventures she and her friends had experienced. It all seemed surreal, almost like a science-fiction movie or a television show. And yet it was his daughter's life.

The final entry had been written on the day she'd sent the journal via FedEx.

I can't tell you much more than that. It wouldn't be safe... for you or for us. I can tell you that we're far away, and that we're all trying to avoid the law and do good in the world. Oh, and I guess I should tell you that Max and I did eventually tie the knot. Give my love to Mom. Let her read this journal too. Then, give it to Maria's mom. And after that, take it and burn it out in the desert by the ruins of the pod chamber where my husband was born.

So that's the end. Our life in Roswell. What a long, strange trip it's been. Will we ever go back? I don't know. Even I can't see everything in the future. All I know is that I'm still Liz Parker, and I'm happy.

It was the last communication the Parkers had received from their daughter in months. Jeff had followed her instructions by sharing the journal with Amy DeLuca, and had also let the Evanses and Valenti read it. Even though he'd been shocked at first to learn how the kids

had kept secrets from him, he understood now the necessity of those secrets. Nancy evidently felt likewise; she had told him that, in the same situation, the two of them probably would have made the same choices.

Valenti had warned all of them that they were being watched and monitored, and Jeff had even spotted some of the people he suspected were spying on him. But he never let on that he knew who they were, and neither did Nancy.

When they were in public, or home, or on the phone, none of the parents ever discussed what was really going on with their kids. They had all agreed to pretend not to know anything, expressing their concern and updating one another on not hearing from their children, for the benefit of any federal agents who might be listening in.

But Jeff knew that in their private meetings their tone with one another was quite different. Jim, Amy, Phillip, Diane, and he and Nancy all shared a secret bond that kept them in orbit around one another. Jim Valenti had shared more of his reflections on the past three years with them once the parents all knew the truth, and they now saw him as their children's guardian angel.

Jim had been the one who delivered to each of them their first news since Liz's journal arrived. Once a month, Jeff and Amy DeLuca received brief e-mails, though the Evanses had not always been so fortunate. Valenti always got them the e-mails in a way that made sure nobody but them knew what was happening: He delivered them as hard copies, which immediately went to the paper-shredder after they were read.

It had now been over a month since Jeff had last had any contact with Liz, so he hoped that the real reason Jim and Amy were eating here tonight might be to bring him some word from the kids.

Balancing the tray of food before him, Jeff moved out of the kitchen area, through the swinging door, and out into the dining area of the Crashdown.

"Here you go, Jim. The Tommy Lee Jones Basket. Extra peppers, as requested," he said as he set the deputy's plate on the table in front of him.

"Mmmmmm, smells great," Jim said, grinning.

Jeff placed Amy's plate in front of her as well. "Here's your Moon Rock Hash and Orbit Rings, Amy. And, if I may say so, you look great tonight. "

She blushed, waving her hand at him as if to push the compliment away. "Flattery won't get you a bigger tip, Jeff. "

Valenti picked up a folded menu from the table and handed it to Jeff. "I noticed there was something spilled on this menu, Jeff. You might want to get it replaced. "

"Thanks, Jim. I'll do that." He took the menu, his heart racing. "Anything else? "

"Naw, I think that'll do it," Valenti said.

Jeff turned and headed back to the kitchen. He opened the menu to find a folded piece of paper inside. He quickly slipped it into his pocket.

Ill read it tonight with Nancy, he thought. Out on Liz's balcony.

Cheyenne, Wyoming Max and Kyle approached at a run. Liz lay on the sidewalk, semiconscious. Alarmed, Max gently shook Liz and called her name. After a few moments, she groaned and began to awaken. Seeing that she didn't appear injured, Max felt relief flood through him like a physical force.

"Liz? What happened? "

Liz looked up at him, then seemed to notice the presence of Kyle and Isabel. Max could see that she was still disoriented.

"She put her hand on my shoulder and there was this big burst of energy," Isabel said. "And then she passed out. "

"I saw it," Liz said. "I saw Isabel die. "

"What?" The word came out of Isabel almost as a shriek.

"I got a future flash," Liz said, turning toward Isabel and addressing her directly. "The MiBs had caught you. They had doctors operating on you. "

"When? Where?" Max felt fear course through his system. If he lived to be a thousand, he would never forget the dissection to which he had nearly been subjected in the White Room at the hands of Agent Pierce. He would do anything to protect his sister from a fate like that.

"I don't know," Liz said. "There wasn't anything I could reference to figure out the date or the time. All I saw was one of those big scary operating rooms like they have in the movies. "

"So you're saying I'm gonna be killed by a mad scientist?" Isabel asked.

"Hey, Isabel, it's going to be okay," Kyle said, trying to reach out and hold her. "Calm down. "

"Calm down? You aren't the one who's going to be the star of Alien Autopsy, Kyle." Isabel shook off his touch and put her hands up to her face, breathing through her steepled fingers. Max had rarely seen Isabel so upset.

Then it occurred to him that he shouldn't be seeing her at all... at least, not away from their temporary sanctuary of the abandoned church. And not next to a pay phone.

"What were you doing out here, anyhow?" Max asked her, fearing he already knew the answer.

"I called Jesse, okay?" Isabel admitted, her anguished voice rising almost to a shout. "I just wanted to talk to my husband. Is that so

wrong? “

Max knew that now wasn't the time to lecture her about how she might have endangered Jesse. Not with what Liz had just revealed about Isabel's future. Isabel's possible future, he thought, correcting himself. The whole point of our being out here on the road is to carve out our own destinies. We left Roswell to prove that we can make whatever future we want for ourselves. And yet all they seemed to be doing was running and hiding.

Max knew he had to get Isabel calmed down so that they could face the problem of Liz's premonition rationally.

He looked past his sister for a moment and noticed that the pay phone's receiver was dangling from the end of its cord.

"Is Jesse still on the line?" Max asked.

Isabel picked up the phone and put it to her ear. "Hello? Jesse?" She turned back toward Max. "No. He's gone. When Liz's vision made her cry out, I guess I dropped the phone right in the middle of things."

Max approached her and kept his voice low and... he hoped... soothing. "Isabel, call him back and let him know you're all right. “

"Are you sure that's such a good idea, Max?" Kyle asked. "The Feds might trace the call. “

"If they can, then they probably already did," Max said. "There's no point in leaving Jesse hanging." He turned to face Isabel. "He's probably worried, Iz. Tell him you'll find a way to reach him later. And don't mention anything about what Liz said. We've changed the course of events she's seen in her premonitions before. We can do it again. “

Isabel nodded, then reached out and hugged him. He squeezed her in return. The contact renewed his determination to keep her safe.

They disengaged after a moment, and Max turned to crouch beside Liz again. Now she seemed more clearheaded than she had a few moments before. Kyle had placed a hand on her forehead. Max felt a twinge of jealousy, but cleared it out of his mind as quickly as it had come. Kyle and Liz had dated in the past, but Kyle was still her friend. And as a friend, he was entitled to care about her.

"How are you feeling now?" Max asked Liz.

She sighed. "I'm doing all right, Max. The vision just knocked the wind out of me. “

"Well, let's all get back to the van and eat," Max said. "I think food will do us some good. Then we can figure out what to do next." As long as the bad guys don't suddenly show up and make that decision for us, he thought.

"Good idea," Kyle said. "Let's get you up," he said to Liz, reaching for one of her arms. Max took the other one, and they helped her get

to her feet.

Max turned back toward the phone booth and caught Isabel's gaze. She was talking on the phone, so apparently she'd managed to reconnect with Jesse.

He turned back to Liz and Kyle. "Let her finish up. "

A few moments or so later, Isabel hung up the phone and rejoined the group.

"Everything smoothed over?" Max asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Isabel said. She still sounded stunned by Liz's dire forewarning.

"Let's get back to the VW, then," Max said, offering her a smile that he could only hope would reassure her. "Dinner awaits. "

Boston Jesse was glad that Isabel had called him back. He wasn't sure what was worse: not having heard from her at all, hearing the news from her about Cheyenne, or hearing the phone cut off in mid-conversation. At least her callback had told him that she and Liz were all right, even if she hadn't gone into specifics about what actually had happened.

She'd sounded tired, but he hadn't wanted to tell her that. He couldn't deny that she no longer sounded like the confident young woman he had married. Life on the road was apparently wearing them all down more than she had wanted to admit.

After ringing off with Isabel, Jesse decided to get some coffee at the Java Joint a few blocks away, near Harvard Square. He didn't anticipate being able to sleep for a while tonight, so he decided he might as well add some caffeine to his system. Sometimes it actually had the effect of calming his nerves rather than exciting them.

As he waited on the street corner for the walk signal, he felt the phone vibrate again in his pocket. Is Isabel calling a third time? He clicked it on. "Hello? "

"I need to speak to a lawyer," the male voice on the other end of the line said.

Jesse's blood ran cold. "How did you get this number? "

"A friend of mine gave it to me. He said it was the number of a good attorney. "

Jesse stared at his phone in horror. The only person who knew he had this phone was a client who was currently in jail, and therefore not likely to be sending Jesse any referrals. Which meant that the person on the other end of the line must have heard him give the cell phone number to Isabel earlier.

Which meant his home phone was bugged.

"You've got the wrong number, buddy. I'm a pizza delivery guy," Jesse said, then clicked the phone off.

Looking into the street, he saw a delivery truck and several cars

heading toward the intersection. Timing it to their speed, he tossed the cell phone into their path.

A second after it clattered to the street, he heard a satisfying crunch as the delivery truck smashed the phone into a pile of wire and broken components. The truck's driver honked at Jesse and flipped him the bird.

Needing coffee now more than ever, Jesse continued down the street.

If they are still tapping me, do they know that was Isabel who called? Am I about to be dragged into the alien nightmare again? Jesse knew he couldn't answer those questions. Nor was there anyone in Boston with whom he could even discuss them.

He was alone. All alone.

Cheyenne, Wyoming "I don't remember anything more," Liz said. "I'm sorry. These precognitive flashes aren't exactly linear. And I can't control when I get them. "

"So the only clue we have is that Isabel is apparently put on a plane first," Kyle said, wiping fried chicken grease off his fingers. "Easy. So we keep her from getting on any planes. "

"That's not so easy to do when the reason she was on the plane appears to be because she was in custody" Maria said. "It sounds like our real goal is to keep her from getting captured in the first place. "

"Brilliant," Michael said, digging into a tub of soggy coleslaw with his plastic spork. "I think that's the general idea for all of us. "

Maria glared at Michael but said nothing.

"Knowing that we're in more and more danger the longer we stay in Cheyenne, we need to decide how we're getting out of here," Isabel said, breaking the momentary silence. She was idly playing with her long braid.

"But we've still got unfinished business here," Kyle said.

"You're right," Michael said. "We left a bunch of stuff at the hotel. Doesn't make sense to ditch what's left of our worldly possessions if we don't have to. "

Kyle shook his head, looking exasperated. "Who cares about that? There are two people who are in the hospital because of us. Are we really going to just abandon the people who got hurt because of us? "

"Are you still suggesting that Max try to sneak into the hospital and heal them?" Michael asked.

Kyle nodded. "Why not? It's not like he hasn't done the same thing before. In fact, it seems like every few months back in Roswell he was sneaking into a hospital to heal somebody. And Maria and Isabel have had experience working as candy strippers more than once. "

Max winced. Early in his relationship with Liz, he had failed to heal her beloved grandmother, who was dying. He didn't think she

held it against him, but he still felt guilty about having let her down.

"I agree with Kyle," Isabel said. "Those people wouldn't be in this situation if it weren't for us. I think we can help them and not get caught. Like Kyle said, we've done it before. "

"We've also been shot at before, and I don't want to repeat that experience," Michael said, his tone acidic. "I vote no. "

"I vote yes," Maria said, offering a half-apologetic look to Michael.

Max made a decision. "It's not up for a vote. We're going to help them. Then we're going to get our stuff. And then we're getting out of Cheyenne. "

"How do we know that deciding to get out of Cheyenne isn't what gets Isabel captured? "

"Don't go there, E. T.," Maria said, shaking her head. "We're sunk if we start getting so freaked out about Liz's psychic hot line that we can't make any decisions. "

"We' don't seem to need to make any decisions," Michael said, leveling his insolent gaze straight at Max. "Our Mighty King has spoken. "

"Let's not go through this again, Michael," Max said, an edge of anger creeping into his voice in spite of himself. Less than a year earlier, Michael had challenged Max's leadership one too many times. He'd even managed to steal the Antarian royal seal Max carried embedded within him. But Max had taken it back, and Michael had pretty much toed the line since then.

"Before you go off making pronouncements, there's one thing we haven't really talked about," Maria said. Max assumed her edgy tone was in defense of Michael. "When you heal people, you transfer some of your alien essence into them. Look at what's happened to Liz. How do we know it won't happen to Kyle? You've healed him twice now. And how about his dad? Or, for that matter, what about Brody's daughter, and all those sick kids you healed Christmas before last? Or any of the others? "

"We don't know that the power transfer works on everybody" Isabel said.

"Actually, I think it's started to work on me already," Kyle said. Everyone looked at him, but only Maria's face revealed any shock. Max remembered she had been the only one unconscious back in the mall's corridor. She hadn't witnessed Kyle's surprising psionic episode.

"I mean, what was going on with me back at the mall?" Kyle said. "It was like I was inside a bunch of people's heads all at once, but I wasn't, like, telepathic or anything. "

"Didn't Nasedo say that your powers come from the parts of the brain that aren't fully used in most humans?" Liz asked, looking toward Michael.

"Pretty much," Michael responded. "He told me that when we were engineered, we were given the capacity to do everything the human brain is capable of. He said that humans were wasteful, that they didn't even reach a small part of their brains' potential. We're programmed to be thousands of years ahead of mankind. "

"Minimal brain use isn't exactly a new theory," Liz said. "Science-fiction writers have been using that as a plot device for years. In order to be smarter or more powerful, we just need to use our whole brain instead of only a fraction of it. "

"So Nasedo said that none of your powers come from the fact that you're aliens?" Maria said, looking confused. "We could do all the things you can do if we just thought harder? "

"I don't think that's quite it," Max said. "From what Nasedo said, there are things we can do that were engineered into us. That's clear, given that some of us can do things the others can't. And our corresponding Dupes from New York apparently had the same powers as we do... or at least very similar ones. "

"Not to get too techno-geeky, but the brain runs on electrical impulses, and our thoughts are an extension of those impulses," Liz said. "Since I seem to have electrical powers and intermittent precognition, maybe Max's powers jump-started those neural pathways in my brain. "

"That might explain whatever happened to me today," Kyle said. "It felt like I was, I don't know, broadcasting everyone's thoughts or... it was weird. "

"So, we know that two of the people Max has healed have started to develop hyperbrains," Maria said. "But both of them were shot, and dying. So was Kyle's dad. That's different from all the sick kids he healed. So is it possible they won't develop into the New Mutants because they weren't bleeding from gunshot wounds when they were healed? "

Isabel waved her hands in front of her. "Okay, enough. We don't know whether everyone Max heals will develop alien powers or not. So the question becomes: Do we risk our safety helping these people or not? "

"We're helping them," Max said. Michael rolled his eyes. "But first, we get some sleep. Everybody. "

He turned toward Kyle. "Please set your watch alarm for two A.M. That's when the bars close. If there's any time the hospital might be busiest at night, that's when it will be. "

"Are you thinking some drunks might get into a car wreck tonight to create a diversion for us?" Michael said, smirking at Max.

"There doesn't seem to be much else for the locals to do in this town at night besides hit the cowboy bars," Max said. He looked

around the van at the others. "We'll go over everything at two. But first, we all need to get some sleep and recharge our batteries. "

A few minutes later, everyone in the group seemed to have made the best of its situation. Michael and Maria were in the very back of the Microbus, while Max, Liz, and Isabel tried to get comfortable in the center section. Kyle occupied the driver's seat, his body leaning over onto the window, his legs propped up on the passenger seat. It wasn't a comfortable arrangement, but it wasn't the first time they had slept this way. At least this time they didn't have their luggage to contend with as well. Of course, that meant they didn't have their pillows, either.

For some time after everyone else's breathing had settled into the smooth and rhythmic patterns of sleep, Max lay awake. As exhausted as he was, he was even more tired of running... and of wondering what Earthly or otherworldly menace would threaten him, his friends, and his family next.

Eventually, fatigue won out, and Max fell into a deep sleep that even his nightmares didn't dare trouble.

<i>11 New York City. July 1999.</i>
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Kal Langley stepped out of the limousine, and into a small puddle of water. Things are not going smoothly, he thought.

He had taken a break from the press tour for his latest film to go on a "personal errand." His limo driver knew better than to question why they were at a seedy outdoor storage facility, and he was likely looking the other way now.

Langley stepped up to the rolling door of the storage locker and grasped the pair of locks on it. Strange. I only put one lock on it, and neither of these is it. A rumble in his stomach gave voice to the suspicion that knotted there. Has someone been in here? He put his hands over the locks and mentally pushed. A slight glow came from his hand, and the locks both clicked open.

He rolled the door halfway open, ducked under it, and closed it again. No use in giving his driver any reason to ask questions. His palm glowed, lighting the area. He could immediately see that things were not as he had left them.

There were more crates and cases than he'd remembered, and the crates he was looking for weren't there. Reaching over to one of the unknown cases, he ripped it open. Thick dust sloughed off from the lid. Inside the box were bags filled with bricks of a powdery

substance. Cocaine. Why is there cocaine in my storage locker? Expendng only a little of his strength, he ripped the wooden top off a long rectangular crate. Inside, the packing material padded guns. Not his guns.

Langley began pushing boxes and crates aside. Some of his materials were here, but the four crates that had held the Royal Four's pods were missing. Then, he spotted something on the floor. A dark stain, surrounded by other stains.

Kneeling, he put his brightly shining palm near it. The stain was dark brown, almost black, and he was reasonably certain it was blood. The other stains were more clear, like the trails that slugs left behind them as they moved.

Langley's mind whirled. Given the dust on the floor and the boxes of guns and drugs, it appeared that no one had been in the storage locker for years. But whoever was here last had taken the crates containing the pods. And someone had been injured here, or perhaps even killed. It appeared that the pods had been opened, if the remnants of slime on the floor were any indication.

But were they all opened? Were they all alive and unharmed? Where are they now? Langley hadn't intended to awaken the Royal Four until they were fully mature. Extended gestation inside the membranous pods would nurture their alien powers, making them stronger and more powerful the longer they remained ensconced.

Sometimes he thought that he might not awaken them at all. Why would he want to return to Antar? Besides, the other Royal Four were already living in Roswell. Or Royal Three at least, if his surveillance information was correct. Perhaps Nasedo had the fourth child, Ava, with him. Or perhaps she hadn't survived into her teens. He didn't know. He hadn't had contact with Nasedo for years.

Today was supposed to just be a check-in to make sure that nothing had gone wrong with the pods, whatever he decided to do with them in the future.

Something was definitely wrong. The Royal Four was missing. Luckily, Langley had resources.

While Rath and Lonnie made out on the sidewalk, Zan and Ava chose several slices of hot pizza from the twenty-four-hour pizza joint on the corner. Zan grabbed a handful of sugar packets from the condiment area; they'd help season the spicy pepperoni to suit the group's alien palates.

Zan looked over at Ava as she went to "pay" the clerk. He always enjoyed watching her work her mindwarp mojo. She handed the clerk a bar flyer she had picked up from the sidewalk outside, and asked, "Can you break this? "

"Sure," the man said agreeably. He counted out thirty-eight

dollars in change and handed it back to Ava. Grinning, she turned and came over to Zan.

They exited the shop and handed Rath and Lonnie their slices. Zan sprinkled the sugar over his, and handed packets to the others so that they could do the same. None of them knew why they liked such a high contrast of sweet and sour tastes together; their favorite mixture lately had been horseradish over ice cream.

"Got us some money, too," Ava said. "What say we go dancing? "

"Sounds good to me," Lonnie said. "How about Club Rent? "

Rath seemed distracted, and looked over his shoulder for the third time in the last minute.

"What's up? Ava toasted the pizza guy's brain," Zan said. "He's not gonna come after us. "

"Not him," Rath said. "Somebody else has been bogey-ing us. Old balding guy. Dressed in black. He's been following us for the last twenty minutes. "

Zan looked back over his shoulder and saw a man matching the description Rath had given standing on the opposite side of the street. He didn't seem to flinch when he saw Zan looking at him. And he clearly was watching them.

"Turn up this alley here," Zan said. "And don't act like anything'sup. "

The four of them moved into the alley, chatting and laughing and eating their pizza. As soon as they were past a car parked in the alley, Rath ducked behind it, while the others continued on their way.

Zan turned his head slightly as they neared the end of the alley on the other side, and saw that the man was indeed following them. Almost there, Zan thought.

And then Rath stepped up from his crouch behind the car, unleashing a blast from his hands that threw the man up against the brick wall on the other side of the alley.

As the others turned to run back toward Rath, Zan was astonished to see the older man shake off the blast and raise his own hand, releasing a pulse of energy that sent a surprised Rath tumbling across the hood of a car.

Zan, Ava, and Lonnie raised their hands in unison, palms outward, toward the man. "Who are you?" Zan asked loudly. "If you're looking for trouble, you found it. "

The man smiled. Zan noticed he looked a lot like the weasely Cypher guy from The Matrix, and that he was dressed awfully well. "I'm not looking for trouble," the man said. "I'm looking for you. The Royal Four. "

An hour later Kal Langley had imparted all of the knowledge to the Royal Four that he planned to for now. He wasn't sure what their

destiny was, but at sixteen years of age, none of them seemed overly concerned with getting back to their home planet.

When they told him they had a lair underneath the New York city streets... "an underground lair like Lex Luthor had in the first Superman movie," Rath had bragged... Langley had offered to help them secure some aboveground lodgings. Although he didn't say it, they stank, and their post-punk outfits and lifestyle were hardly conducive to a prosperous future.

They had turned him down, intent on making it "on their own." They did accept the alien artifacts he gave them, however, as well as the knowledge that he shared with them. But that was all they said they wanted.

We'll see where they are in a couple years, Langley thought as he bid them good-bye. They're a lot tougher than that Roswell group.

En route to New York City. Fall 2002.

As Bartolli gave the members of the strike team their instructions as to how to deal with the prisoners, Margolin called Agent Harrison. He used his cell phone rather than the airplanes phone, more out of habit than a fear of the signal being compromised.

"What's the progress in Cheyenne, Agent Harrison?" he asked as soon as the young agent picked up.

The man hesitated. "Not good, sir. It appears that the agents there engaged in a confrontation with the teens, and that the kids escaped. "

"Where was this confrontation? "

"It was at the mall, sir, but most of it was apparently away from the public view. Unfortunately, word has leaked out from law enforcement there, largely because of the circumstances. The targets blew out a store window, collapsed part of a concrete hallway on which the agents were standing, and caused a multiple-car accident. It's hard to contain that from the media. "

Margolin gritted his teeth. "Get it contained. No footage on the news. Confiscate all security tapes and whatever else might be around. "

"What about the cover story?" Harrison asked. "Currently, it's very vague, announcing only that these are possible terrorist actions, and that the FBI is looking into it. No descriptions or pictures of the six teens have been disseminated. "

"That's about the best cover story we can go with given the public nature of the... " Something clicked in Margolin's brain. "Did you say 'six teens'? "

"Yes, sir. Max and Isabel Evans, Michael Guerin, Liz Parker, Maria DeLuca, and Kyle Valenti were spotted. Tess Harding was not seen with them. "

Margolin's mind whirled. "Get me visual confirmation on that

from the mall security cams as soon as you can, Harrison. We may have a problem. “

"What's that, sir? “

"We're en route to New York City right now, and the army has taken into custody... this morning... Isabel Evans, Michael Guerin, and Tess Harding. “

There was another beat of silence, and Margolin imagined that Harrison was as shocked by the news as he himself was. "I'll work on visuals immediately, sir. “

Margolin clicked off the phone and called for Bartolli.

What are we dealing with here? he thought. How can Isabel Evans and Michael Guerin be in two places at once? Can there be more than one of each of them? Bertram had said that Guerin had evidenced shape- changing powers. If that's true, couldn't the aliens be anyone among them? Just how many of them are there, anyway? Colonel Bertram welcomed his old friend with a hearty handshake. "You're looking well, Matt." It was a lie and the truth all at once. Margolin was so scarred up that he never looked well, but he did seem fit and trim.

Margolin nodded and offered a slight smile. "Thanks, Grant. You too." He gestured to the dangerous- looking man at his side. "This is Bartolli. “

Bertram started to extend his hand, but noticed that Bartolli didn't seem to be one for niceties, so he withdrew it and just nodded.

Eight paramilitary-outfitted agents trooped into the facility behind Margolin and Bartolli. "Sorry I don't have time to play catch-up, Colonel," Margolin said. "We need to see the prisoners. “

Bertram nodded and extended his arm. "Right this way. “

They came down a wide hallway, passing by the armed guards outside the heavy steel doors. A side room had a bank of monitors, each showing the rooms from different angles. A guard sat nearby, keeping a steady eye on the monitors. The three teens were exactly as Bertram had last seen them, strapped to their chairs, immobile.

Margolin leaned in to see the monitors, studying each of them closely. Bartolli's eyes scanned the monitors as well, though not from as close a vantage point.

Pointing at the image of the boy, Margolin asked, "Is this the one that changed his shape? “

"It wasn't exactly his shape," Bertram said. "It was more his face. It was like Mission: Impossible, except it didn't involve tearing off a rubber mask. It was as though his features just melted and reshaped themselves. Damnedest thing I ever saw. “

"Did either of the girls change their faces or display any unusual abilities?" Bartolli asked, his voice raspy. It was the first thing he'd

said since entering the facility.

Bertram shook his head. "No, they were pretty well debilitated by the gas the police used. "

"They're about to be even more debilitated," Margolin said. "Colonel, please remove your men from this corridor. "

The guard in the monitor room looked at Bertram, and the colonel nodded. The man left. Bertram stepped into the corridor. "All right, men, please exit the corridor. Take a lunch break. "

After his men had left, the agents of Margolin's who had been waiting in the corridors swiftly moved into position. Canisters were dumped through a resealing chute. Bertram looked back at the monitors and saw them drop into the detention rooms. A barely visible vapor rose out of the canisters.

At first, the teens struggled against their bonds, and tried to hold their breath, knowing they were being gassed again. But after a few minutes, all three were unconscious.

Bartolli stepped out of the room and barked an order to the agents. Bertram watched as they donned gas masks and entered the rooms, unlocking the bonds that his man had put on the detainees and replacing them with cuffs and restraints of their own.

With Bartolli out of the room and headed down toward the detention chambers, Bertram finally saw his chance to speak to his old friend in private. "So, Matt, do you mind telling me what all this is about? "

Margolin regarded him for a moment, his expression unreadable. He took a deep breath and exhaled. "I'm afraid I can't tell you, Matt. "

"Come on," Bertram said. "I did catch these kids for you. And it's not like I'm bad at keeping secrets related to special operations." He knew that Margolin could not have missed his veiled reference to their missions back in the Nam.

Margolin looked at him pointedly. "No. This one's strictly need-to-know. And any further inquiry or investigation into this... would not be looked upon favorably "

He turned to exit the room, then turned back around in the doorway. "Thanks for your help, Grant. And, in advance, for your discretion. We'll take it from here. "

As Margolin walked away, Bertram stared at him. He couldn't be sure, but he felt as if his old friend had just threatened him.

Whoever or whatever these kids are, something very nasty is going down here.

Maria unscrewed the top of the vial she wore on a chain around her neck. The scent of the eucalyptus oil immediately wafted into the air, and she inhaled it deeply. It calmed her, especially in times of high stress.

"Fine, I'll just wait out here then," Michael said grumpily. He was sitting in the VW's drivers seat.

"Oh, sometimes you're such a baby," Maria said, exasperated. "You don't even want us to do this at all. Why do you want to go in, now? "

Michael made a face. "Who said I did? "

Maria gritted her teeth and growled. Before she said anything she would regret, she turned her back and moved over to join the others.

"Okay, so have I said recently how thrown-together this plan is?" Maria asked quietly as the group, minus Michael, walked away from the van and made its way toward the hospital entrance. The others ignored her.

"We don't know this place," Max said, his voice hushed. "I'm going to need as many distractions as I can get if I'm going to have enough time to find the patients we're looking for. "

"Hold on a second," Isabel said, and the group stopped. "One more thing before Liz goes in." She reached forward and put her hands to either side of Liz's head. A slight glow spread out from her palms, and Liz's raven-colored hair changed to a light blond.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me," Maria said. "Blond? Let's play into the stereotypes. "

"Hey, whatever helps the actress get into character," Isabel said. "I can change it back later. "

"Yeah, thanks," Liz said, her tone a little grumpy.

As they neared the entrance, Max split off to one side, heading around the building toward a secured side door they had spotted. Isabel and Kyle squatted in the shadows, behind a bench.

Maria took a deep breath, then looked at Liz. "Ready, girlfriend? "

"Yeth, thertainly," Liz said in a singsong lisping voice.

"Oh, Lord, please don't do Cindy Brady," Maria said as the sliding doors opened in front of them.

The two girls moved across the lobby, where two women and a male nurse were working behind a semicircular desk. As they approached, one of the women took a set of clipboards and a tray and exited through a side opening in the counter. She didn't acknowledge their presence, but instead hurried over to an elevator and punched the call button.

"Can I help you?" the male nurse asked.

Liz put on her best smile and flipped her hair back with a toss of her head. "Hi," she said. "We were wondering how those poor people

who were in that big car accident were doing? That girl and that other girl? Or lady or whatever? “

The nurse frowned slightly. "They're both currently in critical condition, but we're hoping for the best. Do you know them? “

"Yeah, um, okay, like we think we know the one girl," Maria said, putting on her best airhead voice. "The picture they showed on the news looked like this girl that's in our trigastronomy class, and we, like, thought maybe she'd want some good wishes from her classmates, you know? “

The man looked befuddled. "You must mean Shania Cameron. But you do realize that it's two-thirty in the morning and... “

"Yeah, that's it. Shania! Liz said, turning to Maria and slapping her on the hand. "I told you." She turned back to the nurse. "She thought it was Monique. But I told her it was Shania. Like that singer, you know? “

Maria saw the female nurse roll her eyes and turn away, intent on her work... or trying hard to appear to be. "Okay, Gabrielle, I get it. You're smarter than me. Whatever." Maria looked back toward the male nurse. "So how's the other lady? She was, like, driving, when they had that big accident. “

"Mrs. Dobbs is in critical condition, like I said," the nurse replied. "But visiting hours are... “

"Is your job hard? Liz asked, her voice raised slightly. She moved away from Maria, down the counter, toward the female nurse. "Me and Tamara have talked about, like what we want to do when we get old, you know, like you! We thought nursing might be fun. 'Cause we like to help people and stuff. “

The female nurse glared up at her, one eyebrow cocked. "First, I'm only twenty-six, which is not 'old.' Second, and no offense intended, but I'm not sure nursing is the right profession for you, miss. “

Liz put her hand up to her mouth and directed her comment to the male nurse. "Oooh, guess I hit a nerve. “

As Liz was doing her shtick, Maria moved up on her tiptoes and scanned anything on the desk that might tell her where the critical patients were. She thought she could see something on the monitor, but if she looked closer, she'd risk the male nurse seeing her snooping.

Suddenly Liz let out a yelp, then fell to the ground, out of sight on the other side of the desk. The two nurses rushed out to help her.

"Are you all right?" the male nurse asked.

"I think I twisted my ankle," Liz said. "I'm not used to walking in flats. “

"Let's get you over to the couch," the female nurse said, gesturing over to the waiting-area couches nearby. A television set mounted on

the wall was tuned to a news channel.

As soon as the two nurses were occupied with Liz, Maria nudged the computer monitor and quickly scanned the screen. Bingo. The information she needed was there. She moved around the desk and, in a plaintive wail, asked, "Where's the bathroom? I really have to tinkle."

The female nurse called out to her. "It's around the desk, to the right and down the corridor. "

"Thanks," Maria said. "I'll be right back. "

Behind her, she heard the male nurse ask Liz if she had been drinking tonight. Maria moved quickly down the corridor, and as she neared a unisex bathroom, she saw the door creak open. Max was inside, with the lights turned out. "You scared me!" Maria said.

"Sorry," Max responded. "Best place to hide. "

Maria sneaked a quick look down the hall and closed the door behind her. "Okay. The critical care ward is on this floor, just down the next hallway. You want the rooms of Shania Cameron and Denise Dobbs. I think they're in 120 and 126. Check the charts to be sure. "

"Good work," Max said. "How much time do I have? And is anyone else around? "

"There's one nurse doing rounds, but she went up in the elevator. I think you're okay for a bit. Liz and I will distract them for a few minutes more, and then it's Isabel and Kyle's turn. "

Max opened the door and peered around the frame.

"Good luck," Maria whispered as he moved quickly down the hall.

As Max jogged down the darkened hospital corridor, he could feel the pain around him. He wasn't generally any more empathic than humans, but his sensitivity always kicked in the strongest whenever he was in a hospital. And in the last few years, he had been in hospitals far too many times.

Growing up, he and Isabel hadn't often been sick, so they had rarely needed medical attention. The Evanses had just thought they'd adopted extraordinarily healthy children. Little did they know at the time that the emphasis should have been on the word extraordinarily.

But Liz had changed all that. Since sharing for the first time with a nonalien the secrets of his past and present, Max had been involved in medical emergencies and traumas at least half a dozen times. Sometimes he had used his powers to heal, and other times he hadn't. But everything changed during Christmas 2000, when he hadn't used his powers to save the life of John Littlefield, a young father. Littlefield's ghost had haunted Max, telling him to "restore the balance." At the time, he took it to mean the balance of one man's life for the children, but he finally understood that the use of his innate powers was a gift he could give others; it was healing and positive, in

stark contrast with his other, more offensive powers. That was the balance.

Still, the others were right to be concerned about the aftereffects of his healing powers. Liz had indeed inherited something from him, and it now appeared that Kyle was developing extra-normal powers as well. What exactly would happen to the ward full of children whom he had healed in Phoenix that Christmas? What was going to happen to Jim Valenti? Max found Room 120 and checked the chart on the door. It read DENISE DOBBS, the name Maria had given him. He moved toward her in the dim light of the room, shuddering momentarily at the sight of the various medical machines to which the woman was connected. They looked so invasive, and yet he knew they were keeping her alive. Still, his mind flashed briefly to the White Room and Agent Pierce, who had intended to take him apart surgically, piece by piece. Shuddering, he forced himself to concentrate on the task at hand, and took notice of the readings on a few of the machines.

Since it didn't have the clip-on finger monitor attached, Max took Denise's left hand in his. Pressing her hand between his palms, he concentrated. A silver glow emanated through his hand and down her arm; in moments, it suffused her chest, then her neck and head. Max focused... And saw a large man scooping to pick him up, a smile on his wide, craggy, bearded face... A dark-haired man in a wheelchair, dressed in a tuxedo, putting a wedding ring on his finger... A nurse holding twin babies, still mottled pink-and-red... His hands setting onto a gleaming desktop with a nameplate that read DENISE DOBBS, VICE PRESIDENT OF MARKETING... The black sedan careening toward them in the intersection, with no time to stop, no choice but to throw his arm to the side to protect his daughter in the front seat... And then Max was back in his own mind and body. He released the woman's hand and let it drop to the bed, where her fingers twitched slightly. In the dim light, they retained a visible trace of his glowing silver energies.

Max looked at the machines and was gratified to see that the signals had gotten stronger and louder. And while bruises and contusions were still very visible on her face and arm, the woman's breathing didn't seem nearly as labored.

Staggering slightly, Max moved around the bed and toward the door. One down, one to go, he thought.

Room 126 was two rooms down, and Max again checked the charts to be certain he was in the correct place. "Shania Janet Cameron." This was the right room, but the door to this one was already open.

Max stepped in and closed the door behind him. The room was

much like the other had been, except that there was a bag and some personal effects near a bedside chair. The girl in the bed was less externally bruised than the Dobbs woman had been, but Max could sense that her internal traumas were far worse.

She appeared to be sixteen or so, about the age Liz had been when he'd saved her at the Crashdown. He took her hand, as he had done with Denise Dobbs, and began sending his energy outward, his own limb the conduit.

As his mind reached out to link with the girl's, Max was surprised to find himself seeing not flashes of her life, but instead seeing himself inserted into some kind of static, stable mental setting. He was in a grand cathedral or temple of some sort, wooden pews stretching out nearly to infinity in front of him and behind him. Ornate stained-glass windows arched high above, raining multicolored light down on him as if he were in a kaleidoscope.

Near the front of the cathedral a girl knelt in prayer. What she faced, though, was not a crucified figure of Christ in agony, but a smiling, comforting statue of Jesus, his arms outstretched and his robes swirling about him.

As Max approached, the girl turned. He was startled to see that it was Shania, the girl in the hospital bed. The girl he was healing even now. Max couldn't recall a time when he had seen a manifestation of the person he was healing while he was doing so; usually, he saw through their eyes.

"I'm not ready to go," Shania said, her tone slightly defiant. "There are a lot of things I haven't done yet. "

Max knelt next to her. "I'm not here to take you away, Shania," he said softly. "I'm here to take you back. "

"Back? "

"Back to life. Back to reality," Max said, holding out his hand toward her.

She didn't take it. "How do I know you're here to help me?" she asked.

Max wasn't sure how to answer that. He looked around for inspiration. "Well, you were praying, right? And I arrived. I'm here, in the church. And I'm not recoiling from all this religious imagery, so I'm not some devil or something. "

"True," Shania said, clearly weighing Max's words. "So you're saying you were sent by God to answer my prayers? "

"Not exactly." Max was uncomfortable. He wasn't sure he believed in God, or at least the one that many Earth religions espoused. But he didn't want to cause any rifts in the girl's metaphysical mindscape by getting into a theological debate.

"I'm here because what happened to you yesterday afternoon was

wrong, and I want to right that wrong," he said simply, hoping it would be enough.

She considered his words for a moment, then her face brightened. "Okay, I can accept that." Taking his hand, she rose to her feet.

They began to walk down the aisle through the colored lights, toward the vaulted doors that loomed in the far-off distance. "It's very pretty here," Max said.

She smiled serenely. "Just like I imagined it would... "

A loud noise interrupted her, and a harsh voice echoed from in front of Max. "What the hell are you doing with my sister? "

Max felt himself pulled away from Shania's hand, sucked back into his own body in an instant. The dimness of the hospital room was a stark contrast to the colorfully bright cathedral he'd found in the injured girl's mind. It took him a moment to focus his eyes enough to see a twenty-something woman standing next to the opened door of the room. Her expression was guarded but slightly hostile.

"I asked you a question," she said. "What the hell are you doing with my sister? "

"Can we get some help here, please?" Isabel called out. Kyle was leaning on her, and she struggled to keep him on his feet. He wasn't exactly light.

A male nurse stood up from where he was sitting with Liz in the waiting area. "What's the problem?" he asked.

"My boyfriend just got really dizzy and passed out," Isabel said. "And he's having trouble breathing. "

"Let's get him over here," the nurse said, pointing toward an area that had several gurneys and hanging curtains. He took one arm, and helped move Kyle.

Isabel was about to say a "thank you" to Kyle, when a burly security guard stepped up beside her and grabbed the other arm. "Let me help you there, miss," he said.

"Thanks," Isabel stammered. Where had he come from? How many other guards were patrolling the hospital? She and Kyle had watched from the outside as Liz and Maria had performed their distractions, and no guards or orderlies had been evident.

As the nurse pulled up Kyle's shirt, he put a stethoscope to the young man's chest. "Breathe in, breathe out. Not so deep. Okay, that's fine." He let the stethoscope go, and it bobbed on the rubber cords that connected its earpieces. Taking a penlight, he lifted one of Kyle's eyelids and shone the light into his eye.

"Have you been drinking, or taken any drugs tonight?" he asked.

"No, sir," Kyle said, each word punctuated by a breath.

"Is he going to be okay?" Isabel asked.

"I don't hear anything in his chest, and his pupils are responsive.

How did this happen? “

Isabel did her best to blush. "We were... making out in the car, and suddenly he couldn't breathe. “

The guard standing nearby smirked, and the nurse nodded. "Just kissing," the nurse asked, "or something more... strenuous? “

Isabel was both amused and interested in the question. At times, she had been attracted to Kyle, but she never would have acted on those feelings, especially now that she was married. But the nurse didn't know that, and they were buying Max time. "Well, you know, we weren't doing the freak or anything like that, if that's what you mean. “

As she looked toward Kyle, Isabel saw his eyes suddenly widen. She realized that he was looking past her at something. At the same time, his breathing started getting ragged.

"He's doing it again!" Isabel said, concern in her voice. What is Kyle up to? And then she heard Kyle's voice in her head. Do anything you have to do to distract them. We're on the TV news! As the nurse started treating Kyle, Isabel let out a wail and flung herself at the security guard. "I don't want to lose him! Help him, please! “

The guard put his arms around her protectively. "It's okay, miss. The nurse will be able to help your friend. Why don't we go over here to the waiting area? “

Out of the corner of her eye, Isabel saw Maria returning to the front area just as Liz hopped up to the counter to distract the female nurse.

"I'll be fine. I just want to stay with Randy," Isabel said, giving the guard the most plaintive, puppy-dog look she could muster.

Max had better hurry up, Isabel thought. There don't appear to be any other emergencies tonight, and I don't know how much longer our distractions can work. Especially when our faces are all over the cable news channels.

Max put up a hand, palm outward, to calm the woman who had just entered the room. "I'm here to help, Ms. Cameron." He hadn't seen a wedding ring on the woman's hand, so he'd guessed that she still shared her younger sister's name.

"Who are you? You don't look like a nurse or a doctor." Shania Cameron's sister looked at him with obvious suspicion. "Give me one good reason not to call security right this second. “

"I'm trying to help your sister. I was... “

"She's in a coma," the woman said sharply. "How exactly were you going to "help' her? “

Max struggled to come up with an explanation, but wasn't sure that he could.

"Lisa?" The voice was tremulous and weak, but Max recognized it

as the girl from the church. He looked down and was elated to see she was awake. He also realized he was still holding her hand.

"Shanny! Oh, you're awake!" Relief flooded the woman's features. She moved over to the bed and squeezed her sister's other hand.

"He helped me," Shania said weakly. "He was in my mind, and he helped lead me back out. "

"What do you mean, baby?" Lisa asked. She was still looking at Max with mistrust.

Shania took a deep breath and offered a wobbly smile. "I think he's an angel. "

Max was about to correct her, when he heard Kyle's voice in his head. Do anything you have to do to distract them. We're on the TV news! Shania looked at him questioningly. "What does he mean, you're on the news? "

"What does who mean?" Lisa asked, and then Max saw something register in her eyes. "You're one of them, aren't you? I thought you looked familiar. You're one of the guys from the mall. "

"Things aren't always what they seem," Max said. "I can't explain, but whatever or whoever you think I am, you're wrong. I came here to help your sister. "

"You're the reason she's here," Lisa said, sounding defensive. "The car she was in got hit while the police were chasing you. "

Shania grabbed at her sister's arm. "He helped me come back, Lisa. Don't yell at him. "

"So, what, you came in here and healed her somehow?" Lisa asked. "Is that it? Did you help that other woman, too? "

Max just stared at her blankly. Anything I say will only make her angrier. Better to let her jump to her own conclusions. "Please, just let me leave in peace," Max said quietly. "I've helped your sister, and now I have other things to do. "

"What, like running from the law?" Her voice was full of anger. Max assumed most of it was not specifically because of him, but rather a product of all the emotional trauma she had faced during the previous day.

Max gave the girl's hand a squeeze and let it go. "Be good, Shania. Do all the things you planned to do." He paused for a moment, then decided to warn her. "You'll want to be sure they don't examine your palm until it stops glowing. Otherwise, they might put you under the same scrutiny they've put me. "

Shania lifted her hand and saw that its palm was glowing a faint silver. She looked beyond it as Max stepped toward the door. "Thank you," she said simply.

Max stepped out into the corridor, and a moment later Lisa followed him. "I suppose I should thank you too, but this isn't over for

us, you know?" she said. "Even if they don't find out whatever this glowing-hand thing is, we're still in trouble. "

"What do you mean? "

"We don't have very good insurance," she said. "We lost the car today, and these hospital bills are going to cripple us. So while you're off running from the cops, think about the problems you've caused for my family. "

"I'm truly sorry," Max said. As he walked away from her, he could feel her gaze burning into his back.

Isabel felt intense relief once she and Kyle finally got out of the building and away from the blather of the cable news channel that had just broadcast their faces all over the country.

Perhaps twenty minutes after having entered the hospital, she and Kyle joined Maria, Liz, and Max in the hospital parking lot.

"Sorry about the delay," Kyle said. "They didn't want to let me out of there without taking all my insurance information first. I told them it was an Antarian policy. "

Isabel snorted. "He did not." Turning to Maria quickly, she said, "Don't tell Michael he said that, even as a joke." She knew how little humor Michael found in all matters alien.

Maria raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"Wasn't this supposed to be a busy time in there due to drunk-driver wrecks?" Kyle asked.

"Guess we picked the wrong night," Liz said, frustration in her voice.

"So, how did everything go in there, Max?" Isabel asked.

"Fine. Both of them are healed," Max said gruffly. "I got caught by the younger one's sister, but she got distracted from calling security when Shania woke up from her coma. "

"That's great," Liz said, squeezing his arm.

Isabel could tell that something else was eating at Max. "What's wrong?" she asked quietly.

"Nothing," he said, too quickly. "I'm just exhausted. You know how much healing people drains me. "

"Liz could use her electrical powers to give you a jump-start," Maria said, a smile on her face.

Liz gave her a shocked look, and Kyle snickered.

Maria blushed. "I did not mean that in any kind of a sleazy way. "

"Uh-huh, sure," Kyle said, teasing. "But you just might have given new meaning to the term 'sparking.' "

As they walked back toward the Microbus, Isabel caught her brother's eyes for a moment. What she saw in them wasn't just exhaustion, though that was clearly there, in spades.

He's haunted, she thought. And from the look of things, this is one

ghost that even our little Scooby Gang might have trouble getting rid of.

13 Los Angeles International Airport

Very slowly and painfully, Ava swam back to consciousness. Her limbs and head felt heavy, as though encased in something viscous, like honey. When she opened her eyes, bright lights dazzled them.

Where am I? she thought, squinting against the glare.

Ava opened and closed her eyes repeatedly until they adjusted to the brilliance. Feeling marginally stronger, she began moving her limbs experimentally.

She discovered she was sitting in a narrow, padded seat, both of her arms secured by stainless-steel handcuffs to the chair's arms. Identical seats were arranged in rows before her, behind her, and on either side in the otherwise empty cabin. The carpeted floor beneath her feet vibrated, and she could both hear and feel the resonant subwoofer hum of large jet engines.

An airplane. They've loaded us onto an airplane. Ava had never been aboard a plane before. Even when she, Rath and Lonnie had left New York for Roswell immediately after Zan's murder, they had traveled by car. And she had continued traveling exclusively by car... in a series of other people's vehicles, actually... for many months following her lover's death. She had wandered the country then, trying to sort out her ambivalent feelings toward Rath and Lonnie, the two members of the Royal Four who had conspired to throw Zan into the path of a truck back on that horrible day, when her life had spun utterly out of her control...

And I'm every bit as guilty as they are, Ava thought. I didn't even lift a finger to save Zan. I just froze when they killed him, the way I always do whenever things go south. She considered the cuffs that bound her to her seat. I'm probably getting what I deserve. Those government guys will cut me open to see what makes me tick. Maybe after it's all over, I'll see Zan again. And the other Ava, the one from Roswell.

Hot tears stung her eyes as memories of the past two years continued spooling past her. She remembered how she'd survived being alone on the road by discreetly obtaining transportation, meals, and lodging from people she encountered along the way, courtesy of her mindwarp abilities. She'd never influenced anyone to give her any more than they could afford, and therefore had managed not to rouse

much unwanted attention before moving on to obtain aid from her next "sponsor. "

Ava had been sitting in a dingy little roadside diner somewhere in Ohio, grieving Zan, when she'd felt the fiery death of her other self... Tess, as her alter ego had called herself. When Rath and Lonnie had taken Ava to Roswell just before the big alien summit meeting that had followed Zan's death, she and Tess had evidently forged a subtle psychic connection.

The psychic flash Ava had endured at the precise moment of Tess's demise... a vicarious empathic experience that had seemed more real to her than even her most vivid dreams of Zan and Antar... had convinced her that she could no longer survive entirely on her own, a destitute half-alien waif with no one to lean on except for those whom she coerced into giving her aid and comfort. She realized that the surviving members of Antar's Royal Four needed one another, regardless of which set of them, if any, were the "real deal," as Rath liked to say. Just as Tess's preordained place had been with her own podmates, Max, Isabel, and Michael... Roswell 's version of the Royal Four... so, too, did Ava belong among her own kind.

This understanding had come to her as she'd walked alongside the median strip of a lonely stretch of highway, considering the aftermath of Tess's demise while watching the cars that flew past her in either direction. Ava knew it would be a simple matter to mindwarp any one of the drivers into stopping for her, and taking her in whatever direction she wanted to go.

The only question that remained then was, Which way? She knew that her heart still belonged to Zan, and that it always would. But Zan was dead, and the closest facsimile was a New Mexico teenager named Max Evans. Like her, this other Zan was now facing life without his predestined soulmate; Tess, the Roswell Zan's Ava, was gone, just as her own Zan was.

I could go to Roswell and have my Zan again, and he can have his Tess, she told herself as the traffic continued to whiz past, every car an opportunity, each direction a gateway to a unique life that would exclude the possibility of any other. One of those directions led eastward, back toward New York. The other would eventually wind southwestward to Roswell. And Zan.

But even as these thoughts swirled through her mind, she'd known that trying to hold on to Zan this way was wrong. She had seen the way the other Zan... or rather Max... had looked at the slight, dark-haired girl he'd called Liz.

He wasn't Zan. It was clear that he had long since established a destiny of its own.

A destiny that did not include Ava. She wondered if Tess had seen

that. If that had been the reason Tess had died... or had been killed. The explosive psychic flash Ava had experienced wasn't been clear on that score.

So she began then, reluctantly, to accept that she would never sway Max's heart the way she had captured Zan's. And even though she knew she could never forgive or forget Rath and Lonnie for what they had taken from her, she was also aware that they were all she truly had in this world.

That day she had forever turned her back on whatever roads led to Roswell. There was only one path left for her to take, even though she knew it would lead her right back to Zan's killers.

Ava let go of her remembrances and returned to the present. She listened to the deep thrum of the jet engines and looked down at the cuffs that restrained her. Shame warmed her face. Maybe if I'd taken the other road that day, none of this would have happened. Maybe everything that's gone wrong now is because of me. Those Antarian-possessed freaks and the cops and the Men in Black swarmed all over us, and I just let it happen.

Just like with Zan.

Then Ava's shame changed temperature and texture, morphing into a dull red... red anger that finally came into balance with her omnipresent fear. She'd finally had enough of being a victim.

She concentrated, trying to focus her powers onto her bonds.

Nothing. The handcuffs on her wrists remained as solid as ever. The only reward she got for her efforts was a sudden dizzy, headachy feeling. She hadn't felt so lightheaded since the first time Zan had taken her to a rave. All four of them had had quite a bit to drink that night; they'd all learned the hard way just how powerfully alcohol affected their half-alien systems. The MiBs must have drugged me, she thought.

Closing her eyes again in the hopes that her head would clear soon, Ava wondered what had become of Rath and Lonnie. Had they gotten away? From just before she'd lost consciousness in the hands of the MiBs, she vaguely remembered Rath's attempt to rescue her and Lonnie. If he only had a chance to free one of us, he would have picked Lonnie. So maybe I'm the only one the bad guys managed to hang on to.

"Morning, Your Majesty," came a voice from behind her, startling her out of her anxious ruminations.

It was Rath.

She turned in her seat as much as the unyielding cuffs permitted. She saw that Rath was seated several rows behind her, no doubt drugged and handcuffed as well. She figured his head must have been slumped forward in the seat earlier, or she would have seen him when

she'd taken her first look around the planes cabin.

"You almost gave me a heart attack, Rath!" Ava's tongue felt clumsy in her mouth. The drugs, she thought.

"Sorry," Rath said, grinning without any evident humor. "I just woke up from a catnap. You looked like you needed some company." His speech, too, was slurred by whatever the feds had pumped into his veins.

"Where's Lonnie?" Ava wanted to know.

Before Rath could say anything, Ava heard a moan coming from a few rows behind Rath. They both turned sideways as far as they could, and Ava saw a bleary-eyed Lonnie getting slowly upright in her seat. Blinking in the harsh cabin lights, she seemed unaware of where she was, as well as unable to speak. Almost zombielike, Lonnie stared out an unshaded oval window at whatever lay beyond their flying prison.

Which prompted Ava to ask, "Where are they taking us?" Her own window shade was almost all the way down, and she was seated too close to the aisle to reach it.

Rath nodded toward his own window, whose shade was all the way open, though all Ava could make out from beyond the double-layered Plexiglas was a sliver of bright blue sky.

"Judging from the lay of the land, I'd say we're heading for L.A.," Rath said.

"Los Angeles?" Ava said, frowning.

"Yup. Swimmin' pools. Movie stars. Probably gonna be on the ground pretty soon. "

Ava thought of Langley, the first alien they had met from their home world, and their sometimes "protector." He had worked for the last several years as a television producer. On the rare occasions when any of them had heard from Langley, he had explained that his main goal in working in Hollywood was to gather wealth and power, which would make him better able to protect them.

It was, after all, Langley 's job to keep them out of situations like this one.

A sudden flicker of hope warmed Ava. Had Langley subtly influenced the feds into bringing them right to his doorstep? Maybe he was secretly planning to rescue them.

True to Rath's prediction, the jet touched down a few minutes later, jouncing slightly just before the engines went into reverse to slow the plane down. The sudden deceleration threw Ava forward in her seat, and she had to grab the arms of her seat to keep the cuffs from biting into her skin. The plane stopped, and a charged silence fell across the cabin for several minutes.

"The service is lousy on these alien-class flights," Rath muttered. "You'd think Uncle Sugar could spring for a bag of peanuts, at least. "

Ava ignored him, concentrating instead on the sounds she heard coming from the front of the cabin, just beyond the first-class curtains. Footfalls.

When the curtains opened a moment later, Ava half expected to see the face of their occasional protector.

Instead several hard-faced men in black suits entered the cabin. Guns drawn, they marched purposefully toward the three incapacitated teens.

Feeling naked with her powers knocked out, Ava tried to shrink down into her seat, making herself as small as possible, the way she did whenever Rath and Lonnie browbeat her into going along with whatever they planned to do. All of the helplessness she had felt when she'd watched Zan die came flooding back to her. She wondered if this, too, was an effect of the drugs she'd been given.

And she silently cursed herself for having been foolish enough to hope for rescue, from Langley or anyone else.

So far, so good, Special Agent Matthew Margolin thought.

The armored car and the motorized stairway met them on the tarmac, just as the agents hustled their three prisoners toward the open hatches at the front of the plane.

"I don't get it, Viceroy," Dale Bartolli said, pitching his voice so that no one but Margolin could hear him. "We go to all the trouble of requisitioning a black-windowed car to take them to the West Coast interrogation facility. But on the way to L.A. we let them look out the windows. "

Margolin smiled at his lieutenant, enjoying for a moment the momentary absence of Bartolli's customary sly, wolfish expression. "Just a little mind game, Dale. "

"Those kids are alien beings of some sort, and they have some extraordinary powers," Bartolli said. "We can't afford to take any chances with them. Christ, we aren't even sure yet how many duplicates of them are running around loose. "

"Maybe that's something they'll shed some light on for us," Margolin said. "Particularly if we keep them off balance psychologically." He imagined that this was a condition with which Bartolli was well acquainted.

"We should have taken them to a secure military facility "

Margolin appreciated Bartolli's thorough attention to his duties, but he sometimes thought the man lacked both a certain flair and the good sense not to question his superiors too much. This was such a time.

"They're drugged and therefore disoriented," Margolin said, fixing his deputy with what he calculated to be a dangerous stare. "They're young and therefore relatively easy to intimidate. It's important that

they know how completely we've pulled their claws. It's important that they know we're not frightened of them. Just as it's important that you follow my orders. “

Margolin wasn't expecting Bartolli to cower; the man simply wasn't made that way. But he also wasn't expecting what Bartolli said next.

"Understood, sir. Just remember that while success has a thousand fathers, failure is always an orphan. “

Margolin glowered. "What's that supposed to mean? “

Bartolli's dark, predatory eyes took on the businesslike aspect of an undertaker measuring a still-living prospective client for a pine box. "I'm just pointing out that the director will no doubt reward you handsomely if our alien-capture ops all go as per plan. But if they don't, your corner office just might be getting a new tenant soon. “

With that, Bartolli turned and followed the prisoners and their guards to the forward hatch. He hadn't bothered to wait for either a reply or a dismissal.

Alone inside the jet, Margolin shivered involuntarily, as though someone had just stepped on his grave.

Ever since he had awakened on board the jet and discovered that he'd been both drugged and handcuffed, Rath had been thinking as rapidly as his fogged mind would allow.

He considered how oddly rested he felt after the long cross-country flight. If not for all the drugs in his system, he felt he'd be ready to take on the world.

Rath also thought about Zan's healing powers, and about how he'd tried to develop similar abilities of his own. As Zan's military adviser back on Antar, Rath had understood well the value of battlefield medicine. Unfortunately, he'd never attained anything like Zan's proficiency at direct wound-healing; Rath had concluded that this was a talent that required a fundamentally nobler worldview than he possessed.

But Rath had gotten pretty good at neutralizing infectious bioweapons, battlefield toxins, and poisons.

And narcotics.

Rath concentrated first on ordering and focusing his thoughts, at least as much as the junk in his bloodstream would allow. It was difficult at first, like trying to start a fire with nothing more than a pair of wet sticks. But somewhere at the center of his mind, his powers began to spark and smolder. The toxins in his blood responded by clumping together like a multivehicle crash on the highway, stopping and thereby rendering themselves harmless. As his faculties gradually returned, the process accelerated.

He knew that the hard part would be hiding his renewed strength

from his captors.

"Move it," said the hard-faced agent who stood almost nose to nose with him shortly after the jet had landed.

Standing in the aisle with Ava ahead of him and Lonnie behind... all of them surrounded by a half-dozen armed MiBs... Rath slowly moved toward the jetway. It took a real effort not to smile as he descended the stairs behind Ava, grabbing the railing to make himself appear weaker than he truly was.

Less than a minute later he stood on the tarmac, watching as several agents pushed a disoriented-looking Ava toward the armored vehicle that awaited them. They had to holster their weapons momentarily as they did so, leaving only three guns trained on both Rath and Lonnie.

The odds were as good as they were ever going to get.

Rath concentrated intensely for a moment, and his wrists glowed like shooting stars. His handcuffs dropped away as he spun toward the agents, raised his hands, and let fly with several tightly focused energy blasts.

14 Cheyenne, Wyoming

As Michael drove the Microbus back toward the hotel where they had left their belongings, Liz looked over at Max. Something was definitely wrong. But he didn't want to talk about it, so she wasn't going to press the issue. Yet.

"So our pictures are on the news then?" Michael asked.

"Just the three of us guys," Kyle said. "They weren't very good shots, though. Looked like they were taken from a security camera at the clothing store or something. It would be hard for anyone to identify us from them. "

"I don't get it," Maria said. "If they want the word out about us, why don't they just release the pictures they have of us from Roswell?"

"What if they don't want word out about us?" Liz asked. "I mean, the Special Unit doesn't seem to want its agenda known to the public. Think how ridiculous they'd sound if they told your average American, 'Aliens are living among you, and they're teenagers.' So, what do they have to gain by releasing information about us?"

Michael nodded, a slight grin on his face as he looked back at them. "Liz has a point. They don't have any reason to expose us. But the media and the local cops don't know that. So maybe these reports

came from them. After all, what happened in the mall was pretty public. It's not like it would be easy to cover that up. Even for Special Unit spooks. “

Liz nodded. "It would explain why the news pictures looked like security-camera screen captures instead of photos. “

"We haven't heard enough of the news yet to see if anybody's talking about your astounding displays of power," Maria added. Then, to Michael, she said, "Hey, Spaceboy, eyes on the road. We don't need to get pulled over right now.

"Jesse didn't mention anything about people discussing our powers," Isabel said. "According to him, the news was pretty vague about the details. “

Liz looked over at Max. He was still brooding. Not that brooding was anything new for him, but he seemed to have gone even deeper into the darkness than usual.

"Maybe we can find out more at the hotel," Kyle said. "At least we can watch TV while we pack. “

"No," Max said clearly, speaking for the first time since the hospital parking lot. "We get in, get our stuff, and get gone. No time for showers or TV or snacks. “

"If we even can get our stuff," Isabel said from the front passenger seat. "We don't know that they aren't waiting there for us. “

"No, but we're going to find out pretty soon," Michael said. "I'm parking behind the restaurant up here. The hotel is on the other side of the block. If they're watching for us, we'll stand a better chance of ditching them on foot. “

As Michael parked the van, Isabel said, "I'm staying here. I've got an idea that might help us. And get us more information. “

"What's that?" Max asked.

Isabel grinned and held up the I.D. badges and wallets of the government agents who had tasered them in the corridors. "I'm going dreamwalking. “

Agent Frank Kaneko had returned to his duplex that evening dog-tired. His wife already knew he was physically all right; following the altercation he had faced at the mall that afternoon, he had called her to allay any fears she might have if she'd heard the news. He made his best effort to assure her he was emotionally all right, as well as physically four-square.

But he wasn't.

Something about the operation today didn't smell right. From the time his squad had received their orders to scramble to the moment he'd picked himself up off the floor in the back corridor of the mall, unease had sat heavily in the pit of his stomach.

Afterward, he and the other agents there had been debriefed and

were ordered not to discuss the matter with anyone, even one another. He was certain they all had questions, and it would just be a matter of time before one of them brought the subject up with a colleague. But right now, it was best to keep one's mouth shut. There were some other kind of spooks involved... he didn't know if they were Bureau, CIA, special ops, or something else... and even with only five years on the job, Kaneko knew better than to mess with mysteries.

But the situation refused to leave his mind. He had been among the group approaching from the side when the muscular young man had exited the internet cafe and pushed a heavy concrete garbage can at them, scattering most of them like tenpins. Kaneko hadn't lost his footing, though he'd been momentarily startled to see the windows of the Internet place clouding over darkly, as if by an invisible can of spray paint.

He and an agent named Pelter had doubled back and moved through a plus-size clothing store a few doors down. Initially, they'd planned to see if they could go through a back corridor and enter the Internet cafe that way, but instead they had come into direct contact with three of the fleeing targets.

Pelter had tasered two of the girls before they could react; orders had been very specific that guns were not to be used. Trank darts, gas, tasers, or other immobilization techniques were the only acceptable options. The teens in question were reportedly armed and dangerous.

As Pelter had advanced on the third girl, Kaneko knelt to check the status of the two unconscious girls. For a moment, he was concerned that the girls might have been innocent bystanders... employees scared by the conflict in the mall... but then he'd recognized them from the pictures the office had gotten along with the alert.

The third girl finally got down onto the floor as ordered, and while Pelter kept the trunk gun trained on her, Kaneko had cuffed her. As far as he could see, none of the girls were armed, nor did they seem very dangerous. But he knew that looks could be deceiving, and it was anyone's guess what horrors lay in the minds of these three.

Kaneko had planned to cuff the other two unconscious girls and call in with his cell phone, but a noise down the hall drew his attention. That was when three young males rounded a corner, coming toward them.

The next minute was a blur, and even now, Kaneko didn't know whether to believe his eyes... and his body... or not. At one point during the stand-off he had heard a shout in his head; someone calling for an Isabel to wake up. Moments later, one of the unconscious girls had awakened, and somehow slammed Pelter into a wall.

And then, the cuffed girl had kicked him in the leg, making him

feel as though he'd just been struck by lightning.

Ten minutes later, when he had finally regained consciousness, he saw many of the other agents picking themselves out of a maze of concrete and steel rubble a floor beneath them. A local deputy named Duane Elkins had been hurt the most, when a metal support bar had punctured his leg in the fall; most of the rest of them had just been scraped or bruised when the floor had collapsed underneath them.

No one knew how or why the floor had given way, nor how the cafe's windows had changed from transparent to black, nor how the clothing store's windows had blown out. Compared to those questions, the mystery of how the unarmed, cuffed girl had electro-shocked him into unconsciousness was small potatoes.

After much tossing and turning, he had taken a trip to the kitchen for a nip or two of Maker's Mark. The bourbon helped him sleep on particularly stressful days. Now he finally drifted into slumber.

His dreams were... as always... a barely lucid hodgepodge of scenes from recent events and conversations, snippets of television shows, and random elements swirling up from his subconscious. Kaneko was rarely able to make sense of his dreams, even when he awoke and wrote them in his dream diaries. A few times, some nugget of dream-delivered information had spurred him to recall a forgotten detail, enabling him to use it to help resolve a case. But those times were few and far between.

Now events from the day at the mall began to replay in his dreaming mind, though they were disarrayed, like an incident report whose pages had been shuffled into random order. But this time, as he knelt to check the status of the taller girl who had been tasered, Kaneko found that their positions were reversed. He was the one lying on the cold concrete, and she was kneeling over him instead.

"Frank Kaneko, do you know who I am?" the girl asked. She seemed to glow with a silver aura. She was beautiful, but he could tell she was fierce as well.

"You're the fugitive from the report." As he answered her, the scenery shifted, and he was in an all-white room, strapped to a table in the center. A bright light shone on him from above.

She was now in different clothing, and the leather pants and dark red top showed off her figure. "But you don't know my name?"

"No," he replied. "The report just told us to apprehend you and five others. It didn't specify who you were or what you had done."

"Who issued the report?"

Frank struggled against his bonds, and saw that they weren't like any binding material he had ever seen before. Instead of rope or steel or canvas, these seemed to be composed of energy. "Why am I being held? Why are you interrogating me? How are you interrogating me?"

"This is a dream," the girl said. "Don't you know that? I'm not really here, and you aren't really tied up. I'm a figment of your subconscious mind, a part of your guilty conscience." She leaned over toward him. He felt her soft breath on his face, and looked into her beautiful brown eyes. "You do feel guilty about today, don't you? "

"Yes," he agreed, then recalled his duty. "No. Why should I? "

"You don't know what we did, or who we were, or why we were wanted. Doesn't that bother you? "

He nodded. "A bit. But I had my orders. "

She suddenly snapped a riding crop against her leg. It cracked loudly on her leather pants. "I was just following orders. Where has that phrase been heard before? "

Frank looked around at his environment, watching it change. He recognized the fences and the wood and tar-paper barracks and shacks that housed them all, saw hundreds of the Japanese men, women, and children who lived there. His grandparents had lived there, had met there. The internment camps. His grandmother was a Nisei, second-generation Japanese-American. His grandfather was classified as Kibei, a member of the American-born second generation who was schooled in Japan, and thus was more suspect.

After the war, when they had been released back into society, his grandparents had gotten married. They had passed down to all their children and grandchildren the stories and photos of the camps, sharing with them the feeling of helplessness as the government to which they had been loyal branded them as dangerous, confiscated their possessions, and forced them into confinement.

" Colorado River Relocation Center. This is where they met," he told the girl, who was now in a military uniform. "Why are we here? "

"You know the answer to that better than I do," she said. "Something about today reminded you of this place. "

Seeing that he was no longer bound to the table, he rose and approached the girl. "What did you do? Why are they hunting you? "

"I tried to live my life," she said. "Certain people felt I shouldn't be allowed to live my life in freedom, so they began hunting me and my friends. "

"But you had to have done something" he said, though he wasn't at all sure that she had.

"We didn't do anything until they attacked us. And then, we only defended ourselves from harm." Her eyes narrowed. "You tried to harm us today. We defended ourselves. Wouldn't you have done the same for your family? Or would you have let them take you here... or someplace worse?" The walls of the camp barracks all turned white, and the sun grew brighter in the sky.

Something about the girl's statements made sense, and yet, it all

seemed vague. "The report we got about you came in from a special branch of intelligence," Kaneko said. "I don't know what section it came from, just that they had high-level clearance. It wasn't very specific about who you were or why you were wanted, but it did tell us not to shoot you. "

She laughed. "Well, I guess there's something positive. So what happened afterward? "

"Some men came and debriefed us. They were with that high-level intelligence group. No one I recognized. No one I really wanted to see again. "

They were in a canyon then, in the desert. Someplace he had seen before in the Southwest, though he couldn't quite place it. A large spire of rock jutted off at an angle up the hill on a cliff. The girl stood on a nearby rock, her head framed by the night sky, a constellation of five stars serving as a crown. "Show me those men," she said.

He wasn't sure what she meant, but then the men appeared against the rock spire, their images projected a hundred feet tall, as if from some colossal movie projector. Though their lips moved, they were silent.

The girl studied each of them, as if memorizing their faces. When the images faded, she turned back toward Frank. "Was that all of them?" she asked.

"Yes. How did you... "

"Did they say anything about anyone else other than the six of us?" She stared at him again, her cool brown eyes now darkened almost to black.

"Not that I can remember. "

"Did they mention anything about Boston, or Roswell? "

At the last word, Frank remembered where he had seen the desert before. His family had driven through New Mexico when he was ten. Although they hadn't taken any photos, the inspiring terrain had stuck in his mind.

"No, they didn't mention either one of those places," he said. "But I've been to Roswell before. "

Her eyes flashed. "When? "

"When I was ten. We were going to California. Daddy got a flat tire in Roswell. We got to get ice cream while it was getting fixed." He smiled at the memory.

The girl nodded. "Okay. Let's get back to today. You're a federal agent. You're trained to notice unusual things. Was there anything else these men said to you that made you suspicious? "

He thought for a moment, and then another memory flashed. "They were very clear that they wanted all the surveillance tapes of what happened from the mall. I don't expect they were happy that

some of them got leaked out to the news. But I don't know why. If you're so dangerous, shouldn't they be alerting everyone? “

"That's a good question, Agent Kaneko. Maybe we're not the ones who are dangerous. Maybe it's the men who are hunting us." She leaned in closer to him, and her eyes were fully black now, and wider. He could see an infinitude of tiny stars reflected on them... no, seemingly existing in them... with five stars shining infinitely brighter than all the others.

He blinked slowly, and, as he opened his eyes, he saw that the woman was gone. He was looking up at the ceiling, lying in his bed at home, the comforter thrown onto the floor. He could hear his wife breathing softly beside him as she slept.

The words of the dream girl came back to him. You tried to harm us today. We defended ourselves. Wouldn't you have done the same for your family? Something else gnawed at him. There was an important connection somewhere in his dream. He just had to make it.

Although he wouldn't say it out loud, even Michael had to admit that everything had gone smoothly at the hotel. As far as they could tell, there were no guards at the perimeter, no one surveilling their rooms, and no one had rifled through their belongings. They quickly packed and left the rooms as easily as they had arrived, leaving their keys behind on the bedside tables.

They were almost back to the Microbus when Max motioned Michael over. Liz apparently took the hint, and moved forward to walk with Kyle and Maria.

"What's up?" Michael asked.

"There's one more thing we need to do before we leave town," Max said. "And I need your help to pull it off. “

Michael was about to sigh heavily, but held back. He'd give Max the benefit of the doubt first. "What do you need? “

"I need you to pump up the rest of our money," Max said. "Turn the twenties into fifties. I'm taking as much as we can spare back to the hospital. “

Now Michael did sigh heavily "What for, Maxwell? You've already healed those people. What, now we need to make a donation to your favorite charity as well? “

Max gave him one of his patented I'm disappointed in you, Michael looks before replying. "We haven't done right by those people who got hurt because of us. Shania Cameron's family is facing medical bills they can't pay and... “

Michael stopped in his tracks, and half a step later Max did as well. "Maxwell, let's take stock here. We got attacked today. Somehow they tracked us down, and they very nearly captured all of us. They had your wife in cuffs, and they tasered my... Maria and your sister.

We're on the run, we're tired, and we're hungry. We're counterfeiting money and living in a van and hotels, and none of us have lives to speak of anymore. Don't you think it's time to start thinking about what we need to be safe? Or are you still as blind to trouble as you apparently were on Antar?" Max's eyes flashed angrily for a moment, but Michael also saw in them a sense of sadness that seemed to overwhelm the momentary rage. "Michael, you're right. I just want to do this one thing. And then we can get out of town and maybe find a safe haven somewhere. "

"Or maybe we take the fight back to them," Michael suggested.

"Yeah, that worked so well for Tess," Max said, his expression deadpan, but his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I'm just saying that maybe there isn't a peaceful way out of this for us. "

Max put his hand on Michael's shoulder and looked into his eyes. "Let's do this one thing, and then we'll get out of here. "

Michael took a deep breath through his nose, then let it out slowly through his mouth. Then another breath, in and out again. It was a calming technique that Maria had tried to teach him. Sometimes, it even worked. Finally he nodded his assent, and Max smiled. But inwardly, Michael was not as calm as his exterior suggested. What future is Max leading us to? And will any of us survive to see it? Topeka, Kansas Suzanne Duff awoke with a start, her eyes focusing on the blinking LED lights on the alarm clock on the hotel night-stand. Even in the relative darkness of the room, she could see the ringing cell phone behind the clock, and she picked it up. "Hello? "

The voice on the other end of the line was familiar, but her mind wasn't quite awake enough to immediately recognize it. "Agent Duff? "

"Yes, this is Agent Duff," she said. "Who's this? "

"It's Frank Kaneko, Suzanne. "

No wonder his voice had sounded familiar. She and Kaneko had gone through Quantico together, and had even dated, twice. But she hadn't seen him for at least a year. They had run into each other at an event in Washington, D.C., and spent several hours at a juice bar, reminiscing about their school days and discussing the various cases they had worked since.

"What can I do for you, Frank? It's 4:17 in the morning, you know. "

"I know," he said in hushed tones. "I'm sorry to wake you, but something weird happened today, and for some reason, you came to mind. "

"Go on," she said, stifling a yawn.

"I'm working out of the Cheyenne, Wyoming, office right now,

and we got a very strange alert today. “

Duff's mind almost immediately switched to a fully alert mode. "XMA-94? “

Kaneko sounded surprised. "You know about it? “

"Yeah, I saw a file on it." Duff's mind raced, and she carefully considered her question. "Why are you calling me? What connection do you think I have to it? “

"This is going to sound very strange," Kaneko said, his tone almost apologetic, "but it has something to do with a dream I had. I had contact with three of the suspects in the alert today, and tonight, I dreamed about one of them. A girl. There were elements in my dream that didn't connect, but one of them did somehow. Roswell. “

Suddenly more awake, Duff sat up in bed, switching the phone from one ear to the other. "Go on. “

"Well, I remember you talking about a case in Roswell you worked a while back. An abduction or kidnapping case. You didn't tell me very much about it, but for some reason, when I thought about Roswell after I woke up this morning, your name was the only one that came to my mind. “

The feelings of unease that Duff had experienced earlier in the day began to return, fluttering at the edge of her thoughts. Somehow, she was being drawn back into the realm of the Roswell teens with the unusual powers.

"Frank, I want you to tell me everything that happened today. Everything. No matter how weird it was. “

15 Los Angeles International Airport

Margolin didn't relish having to listen to Bartolli right now. Or even having to look at him.

"Some battle, eh, Viceroy?" said Bartolli, who stood on the tarmac beside him, near the jetway and the plane. Bartolli's I told you so demeanor was insufferable, but hadn't yet crossed the line into outright insubordination.

"What battle?" Margolin said, thinking that the aliens had taken all of five seconds to surprise his men and make off with the armored car. "Looks more like a rout to me. Let's head this off before things get any worse. “

Bartolli grinned in obvious anticipation of another chase and capture. He's in his element, Margolin thought, rejoicing that he was fighting on the same side as this fearsome people-hunter.

Both men trotted quickly from the jetway to the downed agents that their prisoners had left in their wake. Two of the six agents who lay sprawled on the ground were still conscious, though a bit groggy. The others, including the trio of agents who had been aboard the armored prisoner transport vehicle, appeared to be dead. Bartolli looked disgusted.

As he made a couple of quick emergency cell phone calls, Margolin decided that Bartolli's recriminations would have to wait for a better time.

Squinting across the sunbaked tarmac, Margolin saw that the prisoner transport... driven, obviously, by the prisoners themselves... was now barreling at high speed straight toward a nearby terminal building.

"The backup reception team will have all three of them back in custody in no time," Margolin said, keeping himself calm with a skill born of long practice. Despite Bartolli's worries, the special agent code-named "Viceroy" knew a thing or two about caution. A net composed of some of the finest counterterrorism specialists in the country was already drawing tight around those kids' necks, and they didn't even know it.

And they won't until after it's already too late, Margolin thought. As long as the girls don't shake off the drugs the way the Guerin boy apparently did.

It was the girls, in whom the Bureau's surveillance specialists and alien-profilers had observed certain telepathic abilities, who constituted the most severe potential threat, at least as far as Margolin was concerned. Tess Harding, or a reasonable facsimile of Tess Harding, had blown up an entire military base. And the telekinetic abilities of Isabel Evans... who, like the Guerin boy, now seemed to be in Los Angeles and Wyoming simultaneously... were well documented.

But Margolin believed that these threats would remain safely neutralized so long as the girls remained too drug-addled to marshal their talents.

Margolin felt a chill roll down his spine like ice water. He had absolutely no idea how the Guerin boy had recovered so quickly from the drugs in his system.

He wondered how much other critical information about their subjects the Special Unit had yet to learn. And he hoped that the rest of the Unit's planned alien takedown operations would go more smoothly than this one.

"Vilandra!" Rath was shouting. "Snap to it! "

As lucidity returned to her, Lonnie felt as though a family of woodchucks had taken up residence inside her head.

She realized groggily that she was sitting in the front seat of some

sort of truck or SUV Ava was seated at her right, grabbing the dashboard as though her life depended on it.

Looking through the wide windshield, Lonnie could see a huge, flat expanse of blacktop. Two passenger jets and a chain of luggage trams were visible in the distance. In the foreground stood a low, prefabricated- looking building. An airport terminal, she recalled, her level of alertness spiking dramatically Rath must have gotten us away from the MiBs somehow.

She turned her head to the left and saw Rath, who was sitting behind the wheel, driving. He seemed frantic, his spiky Mohawk soaked in sweat. His hand was on her shoulder. Had he jolted her awake with his powers? "You should be awake enough now, Lonnie," he said, slamming the pedal down. The vehicles acceleration increased, and Lonnie felt herself being pressed backward into the middle of the vehicle's single bench seat.

Lonnie blinked at Rath in confusion. "Awake enough for what? "

"Awake enough for this. Take the wheel." And with that, Rath released the controls and clambered into the middle of the seat beside her, nudging her into the drivers position.

Lonnie quickly grabbed the wheel, and her right foot fumbled for a moment before coming to rest on what she hoped was the accelerator pedal. "Hey! Are you crazy? "

"Probably," Rath said. "I have to try to clear Ava's head. We need to get her powers working, at least long enough to get us out of here. Now take us to the terminal building. "

"But I can't drive this thing! "

"Lonnie, we came to this planet in a spaceship. How hard can it be to drive a copmobile?" Lonnie spared Rath a sidelong glance and saw that he was placing his hands on Ava's cheeks. She felt a momentary surge of jealousy but forced it down, reminding herself that the Feds couldn't be far behind them. They were still in huge trouble.

She pointed the truck toward the terminal building and hoped for the best, coming to a stop just outside the security doors perhaps a minute or two later. In one of the side mirrors, she could see dark-suited men running toward the vehicle from behind. They were already close enough for her to make out the guns in their hands.

Lonnie turned in the seat to face Rath and Ava. They both looked sharp and alert.

"All right, what now?" Lonnie said, her heart leaping into her throat as she considered the prospect of falling right back into the hands of the MiBs.

Lonnie saw that Rath's hands were beginning to glow as his offensive powers charged up. He knelt in front of the seat and placed

his hands on the floorboard.

"Now we find another ride," Rath said, grinning. "While our queen covers our tracks. "

Margolin took the point as he, Bartolli, and two other agents cautiously approached the rear of the armored vehicle. A half-dozen other armed agents, all members of the local reception team, had joined them in encircling the truck, their trunk guns held at the ready.

After the vehicle had pulled up in front of the terminal building, none of the doors appeared to have opened. The glare of the sun across the tinted windshield made it impossible to see what the teens inside were doing.

Margolin motioned to Bartolli to cover him. His weapon raised, Margolin shouted toward the eerily silent vehicle.

"Come out slowly, with your hands on top of your heads. If you attempt to raise your hands as you exit the vehicle, you will immediately be rendered unconscious." Watch those hands, Margolin told himself repeatedly. According to the two agents who had remained conscious after the Guerin boy's attack, these aliens' hands could be lethal, even from a fair distance away.

Several seconds passed in silence. Margolin repeated his demand. No response came from the truck as another full minute came and went.

"I thought I heard a sound from inside the truck just after they stopped," said one of the other agents. "Like a gunshot. "

"Maybe they decided to kill themselves," said another, nodding.

Margolin curtly acknowledged the two agents, then gestured for quiet. He'd heard the muffled sound too. But he found it hard to believe that their quarry would take such a cowardly exit. Not after he'd seen with his own eyes their willingness to fight.

It was far likelier that Guerin would try to set a trap for them.

"Maybe we ought to speed things along a bit, Viceroy," Bartolli said, looking impatient. "Lets force their hand. "

Margolin smirked, making an after you gesture toward the vehicle. "By all means, Dale. "

Bartolli walked cautiously around to the opposite side of the vehicle and approached the driver's side door. Though Margolin couldn't see the door from where he stood, he knew that its tinted, bulletproof window would have prevented Bartolli from seeing inside.

His pistol at the ready in his right hand, Bartolli reached for the door latch and pulled.

Surprisingly, the door swung open without any resistance. A thin plume of smoke curled upward from inside the cockpit. Margolin unconsciously tightened his grip on his weapon as he watched Bartolli, whose normally unflappable expression had abruptly changed

to a look of shock. "Boss, you're not gonna believe this. "

Gathering from Bartolli's reaction that it was safe to approach, Margolin advanced quickly toward the passenger door. He pulled it open with an ease that surprised him.

The center of the bench seat was burned away, leaving a meter-wide hole that seemed to go all the way to the vehicle's undercarriage. Ignoring the lingering traces of smoke, he stuck his head into the cockpit and saw that the hole in fact extended all the way down to the tarmac.

The prisoners were gone.

"Looks like one of the girls must've whacked us with a Jedi mind trick," Bartolli said, a vague smirk on his face. "This looks bad, Chief." Margolin knew that what his ambitious deputy really meant was, "This looks bad for you. "

One of the other agents approached the burned-out cockpit carrying a small handheld device no bigger than a TV remote. "I can confirm that, sir," she said to Margolin. "I'm picking up electromagnetic traces that match other sites where anomalous psi-powers were documented. "

Margolin realized then that the Harding girl also must have gotten the drugs out of her system somehow. She had probably influenced the minds of her pursuers, rendering all three teens conveniently invisible just long enough for them to escape into the terminal.

Suddenly transported by an impotent rage, Margolin slammed his fist on the hood of the truck. Then he swiftly tried to compose himself.

"Alert the backup team," he said to Bartolli a moment later. "They're going to try to get through the terminal to steal some transportation. We have to head them off. "

"This is a big airport," Bartolli pointed out as he opened up his cell phone.

Margolin gestured angrily toward the electromagnetic detection device the female agent still held in her hand. "The Harding girl is going to have to keep using her abilities as long as they're here. That means she's going to leave a trail. I want it followed. "

Everyone scattered to resume the chase. Margolin swore to himself that the kids wouldn't get far.

Anthony Miller was in a hurry. His flight had arrived late, and unless everything went perfectly for the next ninety minutes or so, he was going to be very late meeting with a very important, very finicky client. And he knew that expecting perfection from the baggage carousel, the car rental desk, and the 405 freeway was asking for the impossible.

But as he left the luggage area, his suit-bag slung over one

shoulder, he began feeling lucky. Maybe I used up all my bad luck during the layover at O'Hare, he thought, striding urgently toward a wide-open, relatively uncrowded array of car rental desks. No lines! I can't believe it! Coming out of nowhere, someone bumped him, making his suit-bag tumble from his shoulder and to the floor. Miller was about to say something rude when he saw the frail-looking old man with whom he'd just collided.

The old man was flanked by an equally fragile old woman and a middle-aged woman who had to be their daughter. The old man looked apologetic as he stooped to help Miller recover what he had dropped.

Then the old man lost his balance, and Miller reached out to steady him.

"I'm so sorry," said the old man.

Now feeling guilty, Miller helped the man recover his footing. Retrieving his bag, he said, "Don't mention it. It was probably my fault, anyway. I wasn't watching where I was going. Are you all right?"

The old man smiled, his eyes twinkling as though he had a secret. "Don't worry about me." Then, still flanked by his wife and daughter, the old man continued on his way.

Miller didn't realize that his wallet was missing until a minute later, after he'd reached the car rental desk.

Ducking behind a pillar beside Rath and Lonnie, Ava carefully altered the mindwarp shell she had created to cover their escape from the MiBs back on the tarmac. Ava felt sweat beginning to bead across her brow.

The image of an elderly couple and their middle-aged daughter wavered and vanished as their forms... at least in the eyes of anyone who came within fifty yards of them... quickly shifted and altered, then stabilized into entirely new configurations.

A moment later, Rath looked down at his own expensively dressed body, and then studied Lonnie and Ava, both of whom had been magically transformed into men. They all appeared to be in their mid-thirties, and bore no resemblance at all to the fugitives the MiBs were chasing.

"I always wondered what we'd look like if we swapped sexes," Rath said, grinning down at his short-skirted Ally McBeal ensemble and taking a few experimental steps in his virtual high heels. Ava was proud of the illusion. Rath looked like he'd been walking in heels all his life.

"Now we know," Lonnie said, pausing to admire her newly masculine form, as well as the sharp-looking business suit that covered it. "Too bad we don't have time to do more than just look. "

Ava hadn't thought of that. She blushed, but hoped her illusory black beard covered it. "Sorry to disappoint you guys, but this is just camouflage. Less than skin deep. I picked this illusion because the Feds are looking for two girls and a guy, not the other way around. "

"Good thinking," Rath said, meeting her gaze for a moment. Though he was still grinning, Ava thought something had subtly changed behind his eyes, turning them even flintier and more calculating than usual.

Then he looked away and the moment passed. Ava dismissed it as her imagination, or maybe even some unintended trick of the gender-bending, mindwarp-driven disguises she had created. She fell silently into step behind Rath and Lonnie as they walked back onto the main concourse, proceeded through the large glass doors, and finally came to a stop at a curbside that thronged with both human and vehicular traffic. The early autumn sun beat down on them without mercy. Ava ruefully wished the air-conditioned concourse a fond farewell.

She watched as Rath reached into his jacket pocket, withdrew the large, crumpled wad of cash he'd taken from the yuppie whose wallet he'd filched back inside the terminal, and extended a hand to flag down a cab.

We're actually doing it, Ava thought, allowing hope to return. We're going to get away.

Walking past the car rental area, Special Agent Billings glanced down at his handheld EM detector, knowing that the odds were very much against his finding the three fugitives before they made it out of the terminal. There were simply too many exits, and there just wasn't time to seal them all. Once outside, the aliens could easily get their hands on a car and make a clean getaway.

Then Billings saw the energy spike on the detector's small LED readout. He understood immediately that the Harding girl must be expending a great deal of psionic energy at the moment, no doubt using her mindwarp talent to alter the appearance of herself and her two friends.

And she's somewhere nearby, he thought, examining the readings more closely. Following the GPS coordinates as they scrolled onto his screen, he pressed a couple of buttons to display the range and distance of his prey, relative to his present position. Then he trotted quickly across the concourse and through the large glass doors that led to the curbside.

The readout on his device was going crazy. / must be right on top of them, he thought.

Straight ahead, beside the curb, a yellow taxicab waited. Two smartly dressed men and a woman approached it, their flights evidently having just landed, and started to get in.

Billings recalled what the files on the Harding girl had said about her powers. She evidently possessed at least a limited ability to reach into people's minds and manipulate what they saw. Or what they thought they saw.

Maybe she should have whipped up an illusion of some luggage, he thought. Strange that not one of them has any. He consulted the range and distance data again on his device one last time, making absolutely sure.

It's them, he thought, then sprinted toward the cab before the trio finished closing its doors. Dropping the detector, he pulled his gun, grabbed the rear passenger door, and flung it open.

"Freeze! FBI!" he shouted.

With surprising strength, the slight woman seated in the center of the backseat shoved the man at her right, throwing him straight into Billings.

The agent and the other man fell backward onto the curbside. Billings felt the wind rush out of his body. The man looked confused, but it was obvious that he intended to run. Travelers stepped around them. Someone cursed, then moved on.

Billings rolled into a crouch and brought the smaller man down with a quick rabbit punch. The man slumped toward the sidewalk, unconscious.

By the time he hit the ground, he had transformed into a slightly built teenage female with dyed-blue hair and hardcore alt-rock clothing.

Someone screamed. Billings heard an engine roar and the squeal of tires quickly laying part of their treads on the roadway. He looked up from the unconscious Harding girl to see the taxicab streak away. A dark-skinned man, who appeared to have been its driver, lay unconscious on the sidewalk.

Noting the cab's plate numbers, Billings grabbed his radio and called for backup, though he doubted anyone could move fast enough now to keep the perps from getting out of the airport.

One down. Just two more to go, he thought, handcuffing his sole prisoner. He knew that this one, Tess Harding, was the one his superiors wanted captured most of all.

As another pair of agents and a large black sedan arrived to help him whisk her away, he wondered why the other aliens had sacrificed one of their own.

"That was really smart, Rath," Lonnie said sardonically. She noticed immediately that her appearance had now returned to normal.

Rath slammed the accelerator down, as though the entire airport, and the roads that led into and out of it, were his own private video arcade.

"Ava was just dead weight," he said.

She scowled, holding on to the dash as Rath swerved around a hotel shuttle. People dived out of the crosswalk, their luggage scattering in all directions. "Hello? Ava was the only thing that kept our magic makeovers from disappearing! "

Rath turned into a parking garage, almost going up onto two wheels in the process. "She was also a bell around our necks. "

"What are you talking about? "

"Ever wonder why the MiBs only seem to come after us when Ava is nearby, using her Obi-Wan whammy? And how come we never had much of an alien-hunter problem until after she came back from wherever it was she disappeared to for all those months after we went to Roswell to drag Zan Lite off to the Antarian Summit? "

Lonnie had never given those matters much thought. But now she had to admit, at least to herself, that what Rath was saying was at least possible. But possible wasn't the same as likely.

"Might be a coincidence," was all she could think of to say. "Remember, the cops and the Feds might have captured us because we were having that noisy fight with those alien-possessed freaks. "

"The freaks chased us into the warehouse because they followed Ava there. "

"Still might be a coincidence. "

Rath brought the cab to a stop across a pair of handicapped parking spaces and threw his door open. It crunched into the side of the neighboring car.

"Yeah," he said. "And monkeys might fly out of my butt. I think the MiBs know how to track her by her powers. So now they can have her. "

It took Lonnie a moment to wrap her mind around what Rath had just told her. Ava wasn't likely to survive for long on her own in some FBI interrogation/dissection room. First Zan, now Ava. Gone.

Lonnie knew that for all intents and purposes the two of them were all that remained of the Royal Four. At least this version of the Royal Four.

But the approaching whine of a siren reminded her that there was no time to dwell on that. Rath got out of the cab first, and Lonnie followed him over to a nearby BMW Rath knelt behind the rear bumper, altering the plates with a wave of his hand. A moment later, he repeated the procedure on the car's front end.

Their powers got the doors on both sides open in seconds. Lonnie watched from the passenger seat as Rath quickly hot-wired the ignition using a single glowing finger as a stand-in for a strand of copper.

"Yupmobiles," Rath said as he drove the BMW toward the parking

lot's exit. "Gotta love 'em. "

The whine of the siren... or was it more than one?... grew steadily louder in Lonnie's ears. "What about our disguises? "

"We'll do 'em ourselves. It'll just take a lot of energy. "

Lonnie sighed. She was almost starting to get used to being tired and depleted.

Almost. "You first," she said.

Rath nodded. As Lonnie watched, his hair slowly turned gray, then migrated from the top of his head to the back and sides, forming a long ponytail that hung down his back. His leathers morphed into a disgustingly retro velour shirt, which opened almost to the navel and exposed a chest covered with wiry white hair.

"How do I look?" Rath wanted to know.

She shrugged. "Like Patrick Stewart having a midlife crisis." Concentrating intensely, Lonnie began to change her own features and clothing, hoping they could get clear of their pursuers before her energies were once again depleted. She chose a familiar face to base her image on, complementing Rath's actorly looks.

Rath drove on in silence, leaving the airport behind and taking an on-ramp for the northbound 405 freeway. Like Ava, the sirens were already becoming a distant memory. Their pursuers no longer knew where to look.

Rath glanced at her, evidently done pouting over her earlier insult. "Nice look, Counselor Troi. If the cops pull us over, they'll probably ask for our autographs. "

Lonnie snorted. "So, where to, Captain? Are we going to try to track down Langley? "

He shook his head. "I know Ava always had a lot of faith in Langley, but she believed in Santa Claus, too.

What's Langley done for us lately? I'm not sure I trust him any more than I trust Ava. "

"Good point," Lonnie said, thinking, If Langley had done a better job looking after us, we wouldn't have had to grow up in the sewers. "So where are we going, then? "

"Where else but Langley's very own backyard? "

Lonnie was confused. "But you just said you didn't trust Langley. "

"I don't. But can I help it if our no-good, rat-bastard 'protector'... he accentuated this word with Dr. Evil... style finger-quotes... "happens to live and work in the only place on the entire West Coast where the two of us can fit in without having to shapeshift? "

She gave him a blank look. "Disneyland? "

"Melrose Avenue! "

The BMW roared northward, drowning out Lonnie's delighted laughter.

Then a chilling thought suddenly descended upon her: If the FBI guys really had found Ava by tracking her powers, then what made Rath so certain that they couldn't also do the same thing with either of them? How do we know they're not doing it right now?

16 Cheyenne, Wyoming

Max had to be more careful this time, since dawn was imminent, and the hospital was much busier than it had been only hours ago. He had watched through a window for ten minutes as a nurse did her rounds, before he finally felt comfortable enough to enter the building again.

He quickly made his way back to room 126, but when he got there, he was startled to find that Shania and her sister were gone. Instead, a bulky female nurse was changing the linens on the bed.

Nervously, he cleared his throat. "Excuse me. Where have they moved Shania to?"

The nurse looked at him for a moment, but kept most of her attention on the bedding. "She's made an amazing recovery in the middle of the night. They moved her upstairs, to Ward C. But they're doing some tests on her right now, so you can't see her. Besides, visiting hours haven't started yet."

"Do you know where her sister is? Lisa?"

"Probably in the commissary. Or the smoking garden."

Max thanked the nurse and quickly made his way toward the stairway. On the second floor he found a hospital map and located both the commissary and the smoking area.

As he approached the smoking area, he saw through the tall glass windows that the older Cameron sister was indeed there. She hadn't seen him yet, but as he opened the door, the pneumatics on it gave a slight hiss, and she turned.

"What are you doing back?" Her tone wasn't as hostile as before, though he could see the tension in her stance.

"How's Shania?"

"She's doing much better," the woman said, stubbing her cigarette out in a gravel-filled ashtray. "The doctors said it's a miracle she pulled out of the coma, and they can hardly believe how fast her other injuries are healing. The other woman in the wreck is also doing better. They're both out of danger."

"That's good."

"Shouldn't you be out of town by now?" Lisa eyed him warily.

"You don't know that I didn't call the cops on you as soon as you left the room last time. "

"No, I don't," Max admitted. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a creased envelope. "But I'm hoping that you didn't. "

Lisa sat down on a bench and motioned for Max to do the same. "No, I didn't. Somehow, it didn't seem right. Since it looks like you healed her and all. At least that's what she says. "

Max sat down but said nothing.

"So, what are you, then?" Lisa asked. "Shania thinks you're an angel or something, but I don't think angels are quite gonna look like you. Or have the cops after them. "

Max sighed. "I can't really talk about it. Its not safe for me, and it wouldn't be safe forjyou, if you knew. "

She shot a peculiar look at him for a moment, then nodded. "Fair enough. So why are you back here, then? "

"Because, as you said earlier, this isn't over for you." Max held the envelope out toward her. "This should help with the bills. "

She took the envelope and looked quickly at the contents, then regarded Max with the peculiar look again. "This is a lot of money Is it stolen? "

Max shook his head.

"Drug money? "

"No," Max said. "It's completely safe for you to use. "

She nodded. "Hmmm. So, you're some kind of rich angel who's running from the law with a bunch of his friends? They all like you? "

Max grinned. "They're all good people. And none of us deserve to be hunted." He stood to leave. "It's best if you don't mention to anyone that you ever saw me or talked to me. "

Lisa stood and winked, a wobbly grin on her face. "Got that." Max started to open the door, but she moved forward. "Hey, I'm sorry to have been such a hard case on you before. Thanks for what you did earlier. And now"... she held out her hand... "if I shake your hand, my hand won't turn silver, will it? "

Max grinned. "Nope." They shook hands, and Max exited the area, feeling good for the first time in almost twenty-four hours.

Roswell, New Mexico The morning sun was still low in the sky, but Jeff Parker was already out in front of the Crashdown, cleaning the windows. Nancy Parker looked out at him and grinned; he was as hardworking today as the day they had met. It was difficult to believe that 2003 was going to bring their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. It seemed like only a few years ago that they had met at that 1978 Village People concert; he was escorting his younger sister, and appeared to be one of the few heterosexual men there. They exchanged numbers and started dating shortly thereafter, and were

married later that year. Both of them worked at various jobs for several years before Jeff decided to open his own diner, the Crashdown Cafe, in 1984. Little Elizabeth was barely over a year old then, and quite a handful, but somehow they'd managed to juggle the busy worlds of parenthood and the restaurant trade.

Back then, Nancy would hold Liz in one arm and help cook or waitress with the other. This morning, her arms were unencumbered as she mixed pancake and waffle batter, and kept an eye on the scones to make sure they didn't overbake. Today she didn't know where Liz was, only that she was off with the rest of her friends. What did they call them? "The Bod Squad"? No, "The Pod Squad. "

Nancy giggled a bit every time she heard the name; when she was twelve, she had idolized Peggy Lipton, who'd played Julie Barnes on The Mod Squad on TY and... much to her mother's chagrin... had also nursed a crush on Upton 's costar, Clarence Williams III. Ah, how things change.

The humorous moment faded quickly, replaced by melancholy. Nancy 's only child was on the run from the government and aliens and who knew what else. And except for occasional reports... like the one they had gotten last night... she had no way to protect her little girl.

As she turned, Nancy 's elbow knocked a bottle of Tabasco sauce from the counter, and it shattered on the floor. She grabbed a roll of towels and crouched behind the counter to clean it up.

She heard the sudden squeal of tires outside the cafe. Still squatting, she turned and looked through the glass pastry case and out toward the street to see what it was. A black van and a black sedan had pulled up outside the diner, and Nancy saw several men dressed in dark paramilitary clothing exit the vehicle at a run.

Nancy 's blood turned to ice as she heard someone bark an order at Jeff, who dropped his cleaning supplies and tried to run for the door of the cafe. He yelled her name, but they were on him in an instant, four of them crashing down on top of him.

Even before she heard them say it, Nancy knew the men were coming for her next. She scrabbled across the floor, ignoring the glass shard that stabbed into her leg from the broken Tabasco sauce bottle. She crawled through the swinging door and into the kitchen, and only then did she dare to stand up. Grabbing the cordless phone on the wall, she considered her options.

Do I call Jim or the Evanses? Phillip will know what to do. He's a lawyer. She started to dial, then realized she was half squatting in the middle of the floor, bleeding from the cut on her leg. She shook her head quickly, trying to focus. Okay, they're probably waiting out in the alley. And they'll head upstairs first.

She ran to the downstairs bathroom and locked the door behind her. She knew it wouldn't hold for very long, but maybe it would buy her time.

As her trembling fingers touched the cell phone's buttons, Nancy heard the men running up the stairs toward their home above the diner. The phone on the other end rang once, its small, purring sound nearly drowned out by the frantic beating of her own heart, and the noise from the men outside.

"This door's locked!" a male voice yelled outside the bathroom.

The phone rang again. Next came a click, and then she heard Diane Evans's voice. "Hello? "

"Break it down if you have to," another man outside ordered.

"Diane, it's Nancy. They've just taken Jeff, and they're raiding the house, looking for me. Oh, God, they're going to be here any second. Diane, you've got to... "

And then the door crashed inward, the frame splintering around the hinges and the lock.

Nancy found herself staring into the guns of two masked men dressed all in black.

Cheyenne, Wyoming "So everything's okay then?" Liz asked.

"Yep." Max smiled lightly "You're sure? No problems?" She looked into his eyes, but couldn't see any concern in them.

"No problems. "

They were walking across the parking lot toward the Microbus. Kyle and Michael had been arranging Maria's guitar case and what little other luggage they all had, setting up individual areas for each of them within the cramped vehicle. Soon, they'd be back on the road.

Isabel and Maria were standing outside the van, looking up at the cloudless dawn sky.

"We're all clear, kids. Now let's blow this thing so we can all go home," Max said.

Liz recognized the paraphrasing from Star Wars, and was about to make a joke about Max being a scruffy- looking nerf-herder, when she tripped and fell forward into Isabel... Suddenly she was back in the White Room, with its painfully bright klieg lights and the doctor and the restraining straps that secured her to the operating table. But now she could see that there were others in the room as well, and still more people watching from galleries elevated above the room. Men in dark suits, mostly. One woman was present.

She felt excruciating pain from somewhere in her chest, but she couldn't lift her head to find its cause.

Instead, she looked past the red haze in her eyes, past the pain lancing through her mind, and into the mirrored hoods on the overhead lights.

She wasn't surprised to see that she wasn't Liz anymore. She was Isabel now, though it took Liz a moment to recognize Max's sister. Most of her hair had been shorn away, replaced by a chaotic tangle of electrodes and wires. But that wasn't the worst of it.

She couldn't see everything because of the medical workers who bustled about her lower half, but she could see that her/Isabel's stomach and chest were draped with protective medical material.

The fabric's light blue surface was stained crimson with blood.

And then one of the workers moved aside, and she saw that her/Isabel's chest was open, spread wet and wide, as they continued to disassemble her, organ by organ.

Liz screamed, and the sound reverberated off the white walls. But the technicians paid no heed to the sound.

And then, there were hands on her shoulders, and Liz found herself looking at Max. She could see her reflection in his dark eyes, saw the fear on his face, an expression mirrored by Isabel and Maria, who stood directly behind him.

"Liz! Are you all right?" Max said.

Liz was startled to find herself lying on the blacktop of the parking lot, beside the van. She realized that she must have screamed out loud. She nodded, and Max grasped her hand tightly and helped her to her feet.

Liz caught her breath. "I saw it again, Max. Isabel was... they were doing an alien autopsy, but she wasn't dead! It was horrible! "

Maria tried to put her arm around Isabel's shoulder, but the taller girl pushed her away, her face suddenly drained of all color.

Max gave Maria a quick, apologetic glance, then released Liz's hand so he could approach his sister. "We're going to make sure it doesn't happen, Iz. It won't come true. "

Michael hopped out of the van. "I know it's not a good time, but we've got to go, Maxwell. Liz screamed pretty loud, and somebody's going to come looking any second. "

Kyle and Maria helped Liz up into the back of the Microbus, and seconds later, Max helped Isabel inside.

Liz couldn't help but notice that Isabel was making every effort not to touch Liz as she found a place to sit. Isabel wouldn't, or couldn't, even look at her.

I don't blame her, Liz thought. I'm not sure I'd want to look at anybody who'd just foretold my death.

Michael started the VW and sped out of the parking lot.

Roswell, New Mexico Ever since the military lockdown of the town following the explosion at Rogers Air Force Base, Brody Davis had taken ever greater security precautions at the UFO Center, as well as at his own home. The Center was already well fortified, as had been

proven when Sheriff Hanson had tried to storm the place thinking a hostage situation had developed there. And while he already had hidden video cameras monitoring the inside of the place, Brody had also installed a number of external video cameras over the last several months.

If another government lockdown was coming, Brody was going to be ready. It wasn't that he was particularly antigovernment; he just didn't trust them, especially with all the invaluable data that was stored here at his museum.

There had been times... especially when Max Evans had worked there... when Brody had felt he was on the verge of making a breakthrough in his research into the Roswell conspiracy and UFO cover-ups in general. But those months had also been full of what he'd come to think of as "lost time": the period during which he felt he had been abducted by aliens. Once, he had even awoken in New York, with no idea how he had gotten there from Roswell, nor why he had made the journey. Clearly, some other intelligence had been pulling his strings.

This morning, he had come to the museum very early. His daughter, Sydney, was staying with his parents for the week, so he had been able to spend a lot of productive time on his research.

He pulled a CD out of its case on the wall bookshelf and prepared to sit back at his desk, when a movement on the monitor caught his eye. The camera had a wide-angle lens, and faced across the street from the UFO Center, toward the Crashdown Cafe.

He watched as a black van and a black sedan pulled up in front of the Crashdown, and men in black leaped out and tackled Jeff Parker. Moments later, several of them burst into the Crashdown, guns drawn.

For a moment, Brody was too astonished to move. Then his survival instincts kicked in. Running to the wall, he toggled several switches, which triple-bolted all of the doors. Another switch brought a secondary set of doors sliding forward and locking into place; the thick steel barriers would act as a secondary shield should the first set of doors fail.

He kept his eye on the monitors to see if they were coming across the street toward him, or were down the alley, but he didn't see any movement.

"Who do I call?" he asked out loud, but only one name came to mind: Jim Valenti. Although the man worked in law enforcement, Brody trusted something about him. Maybe it was the way he had been so protective about Max and his friends. Maybe it was his clear and outspoken belief in the existence of UFOs and extraterrestrial life. Or maybe it was something deeper that Brody couldn't quite define.

Rifling through a stack of papers, Brody tried to find the number.

Valenti had come to see him a week or two after the Rogers explosion, and had given him a special beeper number. "If anything... strange ever happens that you don't think you can discuss with the law, page me," Valenti had told him then.

"Why?" Brody had asked. He hadn't needed to elaborate on his question.

"You and I both know that there's more going on beneath the surface than most people will ever understand," Valenti had said, his voice steady and low. "If you ever need help, Brody, remember that I'm an ally. "

Now Brody knew he needed an ally more than ever before. He finally found the pager number and punched it into his cell phone.

The phone rang once, and then picked up. A tone buzzed in Brody's ear, and he punched in his private phone number, then the pound sign. An automatonlike female voice said, "Thank you." He hung up.

On the monitor, he saw the men in black pulling Nancy Parker out of the Crashdown by both arms. He pressed a button, and the camera focused in closer. He could see that she was gagged, and that the men all had black ski masks over their faces.

One of them re-entered the Crashdown and picked something up from the floor. He placed it in the window, and Brody saw that it was the "closed" sign.

And then, to his horror, Brody saw one of the men look across the street, directly toward the camera.

Directly at him.

Jim Valenti had just put on his Roswell Sheriff's Deputy jacket and was preparing to leave his house when the phone rang.

Strange. Who's calling at this hour? Amy had already left to go back home and change clothes before opening her shop.

He picked up the phone. "Hello? "

"Jim Valenti? "

It was a woman's voice. Familiar, but not overly so. "This is Jim. Who is this? "

"I don't think it's safe for me to say, Jim. But I will say that you once gave me some very good advice over drinks in Arizona." She paused for a moment. "Do you know who this is now? "

The voice clicked into place. The only woman he had given advice to in Arizona was FBI Special Agent Suzanne Duff, when he had counseled her about what not to put in her reports about the Laurie Dupree abduction and the shooting of Grant Sorenson.

"Yeah, I know who you are. What can I do for you? "

Her voice seemed strained. "I can't explain right now, over the phone, but I think something very bad is about to come down in your

town. “

"What kind of bad?" Valenti's eyes darted around the room, and his hand automatically went to his sidearm.

"I'm not sure. But there's been some activity I've tracked in Wyoming and New York City, and something tells me that you aren't safe there. “

Valenti was about to reply when his second line beeped and his pager went off simultaneously. When it rains, it pours, he thought ruefully. He looked quickly at the pager. It was Brody Davis from the UFO Center. Not a good sign. "Hold on. I have another call coming in," he said to Duff.

He clicked the "flash" button on his phone. "Valenti here. “

"Morning, Jim. It's Randy. You on your way into work? “

"Was just about to leave, Sheriff. What's up?" Valenti frowned, and the hairs on his neck began to rise.

"Uhhh, nothing special. I just need you at the office as soon as possible." Hanson sounded distracted, as if he was concentrating on something else. Jim recognized it as Hanson's "tell," the one thing that gave gamblers and liars away.

"Something up I should be aware of, Randy? “

"No," the sheriff said, too quickly. "Just get on in here. “

"All right. See you soon." Valenti hit the "Flash" button again. "You there? “

"Yes," Duff said. "What was it? “

"Trouble. I'm back at the Sheriff's Department... as a deputy now... and they just called me in but wouldn't tell me what about. And I just got an emergency page from someone else. “

Her voice was full of urgency. "Don't go in. Get out of there, and get anybody else who you think might be at risk out of there as well. “

Valenti wasn't going to argue. "Got it. I'm gone. “

"Jim, wait. I'm coming out there too. If you can, meet me where we had drinks before." Jim knew that meant the Dupree house in Tucson.

"I'll do my best." He looked down at his beeper again and saw Brody Davis's number flashing there.

"Good luck, Jim," Duff said, and the phone clicked as she hung up.

Valenti was torn now. Something big is going down. Is Amy at risk? He had grown to love the spacey Amy DeLuca more and more each day they spent together.

Do I call Brody back, or make sure Amy is safe? The choice wasn't really all that difficult. Grabbing his extra cell phone, Valenti moved out of his house and toward the departmental rover parked in the driveway. On the way, he dialed.

Diane Evans was just toweling off from the shower when she

heard the phone ring. Wrapping a towel around her midsection, she ran to get it, picking it up just after the second ring.

"Hello? "

She heard the muffled sound of a harsh male voice, followed by the hushed tones of Nancy Parker. "Diane, it's Nancy. They've just taken Jeff, and they're raiding the house, looking for me. Oh, God, they're going to be here any second. Diane, you've got to... "

And then Diane heard a crash, as if something had exploded. Several men's voices were shouting for Nancy to get her hands up, and she heard Nancy scream, "Don't shoot! "

The phone line went dead.

Fear gripped Diane, and she ran for the bathroom, where Phillip had just started his shower. "Phillip! Something just happened at the Parkers'. There were men with guns! "

In seconds he emerged from the shower, narrowly avoiding slipping as he exited the bathroom. "Call Valenti! Hurry!" He grabbed the clothes he had worn yesterday, which were lying on a chair near the television, and wiped a towel around himself cursorily.

Diane looked at the list on the nightstand and punched in the number for Jim Valenti. A busy signal beeped repetitively in her ear. "It's busy," she said.

"Keep trying," Phillip said, pulling his pants on over his still-damp legs. As he fastened them at the waist, he moved toward the window and pulled the curtain a few inches open.

Hitting the re-dial button, Diane was dismayed to hear the busy signal again. She scanned the list for the special pager number Jim had given them, and dialed it. A tone buzzed, and she punched in their phone number.

Phillip closed the curtain. "A black car and van are coming up the street. They're coming for us. "

"Oh my God, Phillip. What are we going to do? "

He threw some clothes at her and grabbed his shirt. "Get dressed and come downstairs. Keep trying Valenti. "

Diane hurriedly got dressed. She was oddly calm, even though the situation was frightening. After all, they had faced the worst already, just a few months ago. Could today be any worse? As she made her way toward the living room, she heard Phillip talking on his business cell phone. She wasn't sure who he was talking to, and she couldn't make out what he was saying. She rounded the corner and saw that he was fiddling with the Nanny-Cam. They had once used it to spy on Isabel, afraid she was on drugs or involved in something dangerous, never imagining in those carefree days that they would end up with videotaped proof that their adopted daughter possessed bizarre alien powers.

Phillip positioned the camera on the bookshelf, pointing it out into the living room, toward the front door. He was still talking on his phone, hurriedly.

Diane tried Valenti's number again, and tugged on some tennis shoes.

Then she heard a noise on the porch.

The door crashed open, the doorknob smashing a crater into the wall.

As the men in black swarmed in, guns drawn, Phillip dropped his cell phone and stomped on it, grinding it into countless tiny, broken components.

Amy DeLuca wasn't wild about talking on her cell phone while she was driving, but since she was the only person on the road, she decided to take the chance. "Hello," she said.

"Amy, it's Jim. Are you okay?" There was an edge to his voice that she'd rarely heard before.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm about a quarter mile from home. Why?" She could see her street up in the distance.

"Stop the car. Don't go home. Turn around. "

"What? Jim, you aren't making any sense." She saw something then, on her street. A black sedan.

"Amy, turn around!" His voice was harsh and commanding, but it got her attention. She stepped on the brakes, squealing to a stop. She put the car into reverse, spinning the wheel.

"What's going on?" In her rearview mirror, she saw the sedan pull out into the street.

"I think we're all in danger," Valenti said. "We've got to find the others and get out of here. "

She knew without asking who "the others" were. The Evanses and the Parkers. She and Jim had become inextricably tied to them in a way that even in-laws weren't linked. She flicked her eye up to the rearview mirror and saw that the sedan was gaining on her.

"Jim, there's somebody following me in a big black car! "

"Where are you?" His voice projected concern.

"On Katims Road. Near the lumberyard. "

"I'm almost there, Amy. See if you can lose them somehow. "

Amy spun the wheel, careening her Jetta to the left into an entrance. For a moment, she was afraid the car would tip over, but it shuddered and righted itself. She smiled grimly, her mind flashing on the things she had read in Liz's diary and that Jim had told her; apparently, the sturdy little VW had been through far worse scrapes over the last few years.

In her mirror, she saw that the sedan was pulling into the entrance as well, but she had a good lead on them, and she figured

she knew the layout of the lumberyard better than they did.

She steered the car around a tall stack of boards, then pulled what was almost the equivalent of a U-turn around another stack of wood. Now she knew she was out of sight of the sedan, but she was aware that her temporary invisibility worked both ways.

"Jim? I think I got ahead of them in the lumberyard," she said into the phone.

"Hang on, honey. I'm almost there," he said.

Thankful that there were only a few people present this early, Amy curved the Jetta to the right, around a stack of plywood, then spun the wheel to the left. Down this section, she thought she could get to a clear area, and maybe even sneak back out onto the street before the sedan's driver figured out that she was no longer inside the maze of wood.

Except that a huge pile of scrap lumber and sawdust now barred her way. That wasn't here last week, she had time to think, just before the Jetta plowed straight into the pile.

Amy shook her head and sat back from the steering wheel. She wasn't sure how long she had been out, or if she had actually lost consciousness at all. She put a hand to her head and felt wetness there. Her hand came away with blood on it.

She pushed the door open, then grabbed the cell phone and her purse. I'm trapped back here, she thought, looking down at the wood that created an alley on either side of her. She heard the sound of a car nearby, then yet another engine.

Amy clambered up a stack of four-by-fours, trying to get to the top of the pile. Maybe then I can get my bearings.

But as she did so, the blood began to seep into her eyes, and she was momentarily blinded.

But she wasn't deaf, and what she heard was one car crashing into another. As she used her arm to wipe the blood out of her eyes, she lost her balance and tumbled down the other side of the woodpile. She landed on the ground, hard, and the impact knocked the wind out of her. But she remained alert enough to hear the sounds of the car nearby. Familiar sounds.

"Amy!" Through the red haze, Amy smiled as Jim Valenti's strong arms helped her up. He shoved her into the Rover on the passenger side and slammed the door closed.

Amy finally succeeded in wiping the blood from her eyes as Jim jumped into the drivers seat. They were racing away even before he'd finished closing his door.

"Better put your seat belt on," he warned.

She started laughing. "My seat belt? "

He laughed as well, but she knew that neither of them felt

anything humorous. It was just the tension talking.

As they raced back onto Katims Road and began speeding off... without any black cars following them... Amy saw Jims emergency pager on the seat next to his phone. She picked it up and looked at it. "Phillip and Diane called you. "

He nodded gravely "I know. And Brody Davis before that. You can try calling them back, but I'm not sure you'll get an answer. "

"What's... whats happening, Jim? "

"I don't know for sure, baby, but I do know that we've got to get out of Roswell. "

"Does it have something to do with our kids? "

He snorted. "I think that's a safe bet. Those were Special Unit guys. I'm sure of it. "

Her breath caught in her throat for a moment. "What are we going to do? "

He put a hand over on hers, and she knew he was doing his best to calm her. "If we can help the others, we will. If not, we'll try to go to Plan B. "

She nodded, then reached down and grabbed the bottom hem of her skirt. She tore the fabric and pushed a strip of it against her temple. The wound stung, but it was the best she could do for now.

Amy dialed the phone number of the Evanses, but it only rang repeatedly, unanswered. She tried the Parkers next, but the answering machine picked up after three rings. She hung up.

"No answer at the Evanses or the Crashdown," she said. "I'll try Brody next. "

Jim Valenti nodded, and she could see his jaw muscles clenching and unclenching as he drove on through the early morning light of Roswell.

17 Bushnell, Nebraska

I he Microbus had passed out of Wyoming on 1-80, and cut over to Highway 30 once they'd entered Nebraska. Just past the tiny town of Bushnell, they came to the Oliver Reservoir near Lodgepole Creek.

Max pointed to the side of the road. "Pull over up there, Michael." He knew they all needed to stretch, and thought that the sunlight and natural setting might help lift their collective mood. There was a picnic area with lots of trees. A few people were eating or roaming nearby, while children waded along the shore of the lake. A bridge crossed over the water, fashioned to look like an old-style train trestle bridge, and people were using it to cross back and forth.

"Isn't this a little public?" Michael asked. "Some of these people might recognize us. "

Max sighed. "Thats a risk we're going to have to take now, apparently "

The group piled out of the Microbus, stretching and yawning. Liz and Maria retrieved some food from the back, and they all made their way toward an unoccupied picnic table.

They began to eat in silence. Max finally broke it. "So, the question becomes, what do we do now?"

"Are we open for discussion, or are you just going to make decisions for us all as King Zan?" Michael said sourly.

Max decided not to rise to the bait. "We're open for discussion, Michael. Always."

Michael opened his mouth to speak, but Maria interrupted him before he could. "We need to go on the offensive. Now. We need to stop letting them chase us."

Michael nodded, as did Isabel. Kyle spread his hands and asked, "How exactly do you propose we take on the federal government?"

"Maybe it's time we started playing their game," Isabel said, her voice cold. "If they want to kill us, we kill them first. No mercy."

"If we do that," Liz said, shaking her head, "then we really will be terrorists."

"It's not like we haven't done it before," Isabel said. "I killed Congresswoman Whitaker, Sheriff Valenti killed that alien hunter and Agent Pierce, Jesse took out that government agent, we've all killed Skins..."

"Not all of us," Kyle muttered.

"And that's not even mentioning the people who've died because of us. Topolsky, Grant Sorenson..." Isabel's voice trailed off.

"Yeah, how about Alex?" Liz said, sarcasm in her voice.

"And all the people Tess killed on that military base?"

"They probably wouldn't even be after us if Tess hadn't come back," Michael said. "It was her spaceship crashing that sicced the Special Unit on us again."

Max held up his hands. "Hold on. As much as I hate Tess for what she did... as much as we all hate Tess... there's no way the Special Unit could have mobilized fast enough to come after us when she blew up Rogers."

"Max is right," Isabel said, nodding. "Nasedo might have dismantled most of the Special Unit when he was posing as Pierce, but it couldn't have gone away completely. They've probably just been gathering information and building up their strength, waiting for the right moment to strike."

A little girl squealed in the water while another child splashed her, and an older woman quickly hurried over to the girl's side. Kyle turned to look, his expression sad. "You know, we got away, but we left the others behind. How do we know they won't go after our parents? How do we know they haven't already?" He massaged his

temple with one hand and added, "I've been getting some fairly strong impressions that somethings very wrong back home. "

They all fell silent for the moment. Finally, Isabel spoke. "I can try to dreamwalk them again. "

"Too far away" Michael said. "You've already tried it. "

"Maybe Kyle and I can figure out some way to amplify my powers using whatever's going on with him," Isabel said. "It might give me enough power. "

"We don't know what's going on with me," Kyle said. "And until we do, I'd rather not push these new powers of mine along too quickly, thank you. "

Across the highway, on the north side, a train blew its whistle as it approached the scenic stop. They all watched as it whizzed by, boxcar after boxcar moving parallel to the highway.

"How long will it be before somebody else goes public with our pictures?" Maria asked. "All of our pictures? Yesterday's shopping trip didn't exactly fit into the quiet category. J. Lo and her entire entourage couldn't have made a bigger splash than we did. "

"I still don't think they want our pictures out there," Liz said. "The Special Unit guys, I mean. I'm betting that they aren't happy about the news leaks. "

"I agree," Kyle said. "So what if we took it public? Come out of the alien closet ourselves. "

They all turned to look at him as if he were crazy, but Michael was the one who actually said it. "You're insane, Valenti. What, do you think the American public is going to just accept that they've got aliens living among them? And exactly what gives you the idea that even if they did, they'd accept that three teenagers are actually alien royalty from another planet? "

Max motioned downward with his hand, looking around at the few people who surrounded them. How much had they heard? "A little quieter, Michael. "

Maria slapped both her hands onto the table. "You know what? I'm getting really tired of this. None of us has a normal life now, and none of us are even thinking about a normal life in the future. That is just not acceptable*. They've taken our futures from us! "

The others nodded, and Maria continued. "We thought we could be the good little aliens and sidekicks, traveling around the county in our Mystery Machine, righting wrongs and doing good deeds. Well, that's a load of crap! We're in danger. Our families are probably in danger. The Special Unit isn't going to leave us alone. Your alien adversaries aren't going to leave us alone. So what the heck do we do? Do we keep running, or do we turn around, stand our ground, and fight? "

As Maria sat down, her rage apparently spent for the moment, Max looked around the table at the others. Michael and Isabel, Liz and Maria, Kyle... they were all at a crossroads.

But he could see it in their eyes. He didn't need psychic powers to read what was in their minds.

It's time to fight back.

To be concluded in TURNABOUT

About the authors

Andy Mangels is the coauthor of the Roswell novels *Skeletons in the Closet* and *Turnabout*, coming soon, with Michael A. Martin, as well as a number of *Star Trek* novels, e-books, and comic book projects. Flying solo, he is also the author of *Animation on DVD: The Ultimate Guide*, as well as the best-selling book *Star Wars: The Essential Guide to Characters*, plus *Beyond Mulder and Scully: The Mysterious Characters of The X-Files* and *From Scream to Dawson 's Creek: The Phenomenal Career of Kevin Williamson*.

Mangels has written for *Hollywood Reporter*, *The Advocate*, *Fust Out*, *Cinescape*, *Gauntlet*, *Dreamwatch*, *Sd -Fi Universe*, *SFX*, *Anime Invasion*, *Outweek*, *Frontiers*, *Portland Mercury*, *Comics Buyers Guide*, and scores of other entertainment and lifestyle magazines. He has also written licensed material based on properties of Lucasfilm, Paramount, New Line Cinema, Universal Studios, Warner Bros., Microsoft, Abrams-Gentile, and Platinum Studios. His comic-book work has been published by DC Comics, Marvel Comics, Dark Horse, Wildstorm, Image, Innovation, WaRP Graphics, Topps MVCreatations, and others, and he was the editor of the award-winning *Gay Comics* anthology for eight years. He has also written DVD supplemental material and liner notes for Anchor Bay.

In what little spare time he has, he likes to country dance and collect uniforms and Wonder Woman memorabilia. He lives in Portland, Oregon, with his longtime partner, Don Hood, and their dog, Bella.

Visit his Web site at www.andymangels.com.

Michael A. Martin, whose solo short fiction has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy amp; Science Fiction*, is also coauthor (with Andy Mangels) of last year's *Skeletons in the Closet* and the forthcoming *Turnabout*, both Roswell novels. Martin and Mangels also cowrote *Star Trek The Next Generation Section 31... Rogue*; *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine Mission: Gamma Book Three... Cathedral*; the forthcoming

Star Trek: Starfleet Corps of Engineers #30 and #31 (Ishtar Rising, books 1 and 2); and Star Trek The Lost Era; 2298... The Sundered.

Martin was the regular cowriter (also with Andy) of Marvel Comics' monthly Star Trek: Deep Space Nine comic-book series, and has generated heaps of copy for Atlas Editions' Star Trek Universe subscription card series. He has written for Star Trek Monthly, Dreamwatch, Grolier Books, Wild-storm, Platinum Studios, and Gareth Stevens, Inc., for whom he has penned several World Almanac Library of the States nonfiction books.

Martin lives and works in an ancient house in Portland, Oregon, surrounded by his wife, Jennifer J. Dottery, their two boys, James and William, and much love and laughter.

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